

Strip City

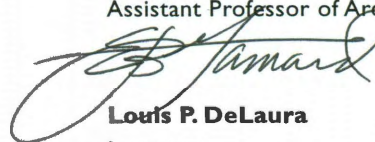
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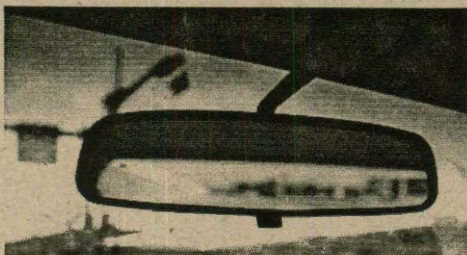
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Lecturer



Houston, Texas April 1997

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Strip City

'Strip City' is both an actual site and a set of visual circumstances found in the modern, automobile dependant city. Physically, strip cities occur along the highways, where audience and advertising merge into a complex set of visual cues and physical *built* responses.

By combining word and image in multiple formats, Strip City can be liberated into a completely two-dimensional context where its visual relationships can be understood, providing a basis on which the space can be acted upon. The result is put forth as the visual and physical grounds for a new way of communicating what we see in the landscape of the urban highway. This thesis represents one possibility for seeing Strip City.

Houston, Texas
March 20, 1997

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world within words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. John Berger (Ways of Seeing)

Image Space

In the reality of production and technology in which we find ourselves, an awareness is being raised between instruments of communication and collective socio-cultural behaviors. The sophistication, rapid-renewal and extensions of mass-communication envelop our entire society and, undoubtedly have effected the production and perception of architecture. Therefore, this question of architectural production should apply not only to the material construction of buildings, but also to its distribution and consumption through the channels of our "culture industry".

This new order of visual communication allows the architect's center of attention to shift from the interrelation of built components between the user and the building to a recognition of the user as the receiver, an active participant in the construction of meaning; in semiotic terms.

Architecture is a discipline of vision, both literally and metaphorically. Although architecture has traditionally been concerned with buildings, large systems or environments, it can now be repositioned into the context of signs, symbols, and visual communication. Part of this shift relies upon the consumption of architecture through multiple media. Architectural publications, postcards, photographs, sketches, written directions, advertising, television, etc. have shaped the modern view of architecture at multiple levels. It would be fair to say that the production and reproduction of architecture in this manner is a cultural text, with its own message and its own potential to condition our understanding of architecture.

The modern concept of the sign, a visual identity put into the stream of a mass audience, captures the essence of architecture or an architecture through association. Quite often, two-dimensional images are the signifier for a location, usually a building which houses given programmatic elements. Using the concepts of literary semiotics, one can theorize about innumerable possibilities regarding images. However, objects remain important as a symbolic location of experience. Psychological, social, and cultural contexts give meaning to objects (buildings, products) and give discipline to the practice of design.

The relationship of the audience to the communication process is viewed in widely different ways. In one perspective, the object is seen as isolated as a formal, aesthetic expression, with the audience consequently regarded as a spectator. For example, within design competitions, exhibitions, and publications, objects are often displayed with little or no commentary, with no discussion of communication goals. This presentation of design emphasizes the aesthetic sensibility of the individual designer and severs the object from its relationship with the intended audience. (Buchanan, 92)

Another view characterizes the audience as a passive reader in the communications process. The audience decodes or interprets a visual statement but is not an active participant in the formation of meaning. The audience is viewed in no deeper engagement than that of decoding references to the subject. A grammatical approach thus emphasizes the scientific over aesthetic aspects of design. In addition, since the audience brings nothing in particular to the process, it is not particularized in any way; it is both a nonspecific and passive audience.

Semiotics, a third and closely related view, recognizes the specificity of the audience. An audience holds and recognizes certain beliefs and reads messages based on these beliefs. "Denotation and connotation distinguish the literal and symbolic messages" within visual communication. (Barthes, 198) The audience reads the literal message while also interpreting signs which express the "iconic" message. The potential readings of these signs outside the communication device are multiple, but the interpretations are particularized within the design through their combination with other signs and the denoted messages. The audience, with its cultural beliefs and understandings, is also involved in particularizing the symbolic (connoted) message thereby becoming an active reader.

Yet another view is a rhetorical analysis of design. Within a theory of rhetoric, the audience is not characterized as a reader but as a dynamic participant in argument. In this rhetorical view, visual communication attempts to persuade a specific audience through argument as opposed to making a statement within a grammatical structure or conveying a message within the dynamics of semiotics. Designers utilize existing beliefs to induce new beliefs in the audience. The specific audience's experiences within society and its understanding of social attitudes are an essential aspect of argument and necessary to the communicational goal. The three main goals are to induce action, to educate, or to create an experience. (Williamson, 56)

Retinal orientation works in a manner in which the "top" is the top of the visual field. "Bottom heaviness" in the visual realm is akin to gravitational pull in the physical realm.

By referencing other realms one can begin to construct a new context for strip city. Perceptual shapes can be defined as the outcome of interplay between the physical object, the medium of light as the transmitter of information and the conditions prevailing in the nervous system of the viewer. Photography can capture the image of physical objects through the medium of light. Framing viewpoint etc.

Typography references the world of communication more directly than photography in the sense that it is used to communicate specific information. Each typeface brings with it an aesthetic sensibility which forms a type of attitude toward the information being disseminated. A history is also attached to each typeface which may or may not effect the attitude of the viewer— depending on whether they are aware of the history.

Treatment of the photographs (which I have taken of the site) always relates back to two main ideas: 1. The juxtaposition of multiple two-dimensional contexts and 2. producing a new way of seeing, both the book and the site. Treatments include text, captioning, typographic investigation, diagram production, icons, image manipulation (scaling, cropping, distorting) color.

GRID structure is: bleed vs. crop, text over image vs. text next to image, hang line vs. sit line, one image vs. juxtaposition on spread, hierarchy in text vs. homogeneity, staccato (off the deck) vs. smooth (on the deck).

As buildings along the highway lose their plasticity and their connection to the scale of the human body, they become isolated into the realm of vision. With the loss of scale also

comes lack of tactility. The construction of such buildings lose detail once crafted for the human body or hand, and the structures become flattened, sharp-edged, immaterial and seemingly unreal.

Aesthetic, programmatic, and communicated possibilities merge with the space of the highway and create the "strip cities" so common in Houston.

This book represents an effort to make a substantial qualification of a particular strip city along Houston's Interstate 59. The two-dimensional structure, appearance, and workings of strip city have come together in text, image, and in the structure and pacing of this book.

Strip city exists in a two-dimensional context. By harnessing the realm of vision as a source for this investigation, detail will be extracted in a two-dimensional format which has been overlooked in actual feeder road developments.

Seeing that which had previously been invisible has become an activity which renews the very conditions of perception—which is necessary to physical reality.

The things we see behave in wholes. What is seen in a particular area of the visual field depends strongly on its place and function in the total context. Also, the structure of the whole may be modified by local changes.

The reversal of images is the giving new qualities to existing (yet unrealized) viewpoints within the site. Addition of term creates a new relationship between the visual realm and the

realm of "meaning" in semiotic terms. The result is a third entity which better describes the conditions with the urban atmosphere the site occurs in.

Night photographs have the same usage of terms— the only change to images was in scale and pixelation. Visual realm and the realm of meaning fuse with the realm of information in these images.

The metropolis of today exists in an abstract and synthetic environment in which there is nothing "real" (natural, unengineered) against which such synthetic constructions can be gauged.

The highway as part of this modern city, does not represent an isolated object in a landscape with a circumscribed field of effects, but in fact comprises a full-fledged, synthetic environment of its own.

The information we receive from the visual realm in this synthetic and abstract environment of the highway is both filtered and unfiltered. Filtered information includes advertising directional signage, building facades, etc. while unfiltered information is primarily provided through personal experience.

The highway is conceived as a functional, task-oriented environment for use by the automobile but also channels human attention, controlling it, managing it, and directing it into productive but limited "activity pathways".

A modified mode of architectural analysis must be employed in order to understand the synthetic environment of the highway, and its resultant consumption-based activity pathways. This

context can best be studied through use of the image.

By producing an image-based conceptual technique to fully render the image context of a site along Interstate 59 in Houston, I hope to create a new scope of activity pathway possibilities in Houston.

Ultimately, this investigation will serve as the basis for an alternative approach to urban architecture. Existing forms coupled with photographic and reprographic technologies will be used create a clearer understanding of feeder road development I call "strip city."

Strip cities are compiled of multiple two-dimensional contexts.

By combining word and image in graphic formats, strip city can be liberated into a two-dimensional context where its visual relationships can be understood, and perhaps acted upon. By harnessing the realm of vision as a source for this investigation, I hope to extract the detail in a two-dimensional format which has been overlooked in actual strip cities. [Slow down.]

"Strip city" can be defined in numerous ways. It's meaning in the context of this thesis project refers to the traditional "strip" commercial developments so often discussed by architects, developers, business owners, franchisers, and consumers today. "Strip city" implies an urban space which has been "stripped down" to bare essentials, or a space where the previous context has been completely "stripped away", creating a new landscape.

Representation is the reduction of scale, proportion, content, or nature of an image. Meaning emerges from the interplay of activating and

balancing forces. Presence is the state or fact of being in a place.

Generally, the tracts of land flanking Interstate 59 in Houston contain a mix of programmatic forms, due to lack of zoning. Varying from lot to lot between 70 feet and 500 ft from the access road to the next apparent right of way, development of these areas have reached an all-time high— only 6 acres of land remains and was recently purchased by a national development group.

By 1998 all open pieces of land will be paved, built upon, and if the economy stays at an even keel, will become successful as financial investments. Corporate campuses, gas stations, warehouses, fast-food restaurants, motels, movie theaters, high-rise apartment blocks, titty bars, superstores, and car dealerships rely heavily upon the audience the nearby highway produces. Location becomes a major selling point, while in previous decades, land flanking the highway was considered undesirable, left-over, and even unusable.

People in Houston, as many other semi-planned American cities of the twentieth century, have gained a reliance upon the automobile. Use of the automobile has shaped many building types (drive-thru restaurants, banks, dry cleaners, etc.) while the structure of the highway has bisected large areas of the city; vertically and horizontally. One of the many results is a lack of definite scale between buildings, cars, people, and the highway.



Familiar yet "unseen"
image off one of many
major elevated highways in
Houston, Texas. 1996





Precedents

Learning from Las Vegas
1977

Feeder road development along 59 in Houston is different than Venturi's strip in Learning from Las Vegas on multiple levels therefore, the mode of analysis should also be unique.

Physically, strip city contains an immense highway structure which both splits the contextual continuity of areas lying on either side and removes the mass audience (drivers on the highway) from adjacent commercial development. The result is a redundancy in signage at various sizes and levels of vision to accommodate several flows of traffic, as well as a force which distills Venturi's "duck" back into a shed and a sign that reads "duck".

Commercial development in Las Vegas is geared toward the automobile on the exterior in that the building is viewed as one passes by at a fairly high rate of speed. Houston's strip cities share this capacity but the flows of traffic are unidirectional on feeder roads and, often, once a driver views his/her intended location, the appropriate exit has been passed. Multiple right turns to make a left, backtracking, circling of destination often result.

Topographic "flatness" is a shared trait between the two types of strips but, again, Houston's elevated highway provides the equivalent of rolling hills and sweeping turns to the driver. One's vision is stopped short when traveling toward the highway or next to the highway or from strip city, yet is privileged in the direction of travel when on the highway.

The View from the Road
1964

The "highway landscape" brought to a level of high art instead of boring, monotonous space. Chaotic, disorienting roadscape as urban space. The driver would see how the city is organized, what it symbolizes, how people use it, how it relates to them (the inhabitants).

Provides the history of highway implementation in the United States. Central Boston as a field of analysis using perceptual information; photographs and experiential mappings. Meaning, rhythm and continuity, orientation, the extension of self, proportion and scale and overall, reliance upon the visual.

The Image of the City
1960

The Image of the environment and the building of that image. Structure and visual identity, imageability/ legibility/ visibility. Creating ideas and visual symbols for those ideas: path, edge, district, node, landmark. Image quality as availability and product of the observer.

Noted lack of understanding of the image of today's cities as being a total field. Interconnections of elements, patterns and sequences emerge. Finding ways of understanding and manipulating wholes rather than parts. Identity/ structure/ meaning.

Finding common themes in many cities- all relating back to the highway and the driver as observer. Production of "generic cities".

Thoughts on 'Image Space in the Generic City'

March 1996

The experiential context in the modern city has been manipulated through the proliferation of two-dimensional imagery. A complex space of universalized symbolic and iconographic communications emerges as these cities grow.

Subject/object relationships between viewer and viewed, artifact and virtual reality have become increasingly blurred with expanding photographic technologies. The once obvious relationship between inhabitant and the city becomes a multi-dimensional perceptual overload where nostalgia rivals individual identity.

Gendered physical space in the city is transferred into the two-dimensional image space in the form of icons, comics, advertising and propaganda.

Symbols and icons replace "written" language in many of today's cities. Without such pictorial language, many important pieces of information would be left uncommunicated.

Spectacles and commodities inhabit the image space of the modern shopping mall; the smaller, consumer-based version of the city. Goods act as symbolic connectors to status and lifestyle.

Orientation, in both a psychological and perceptual sense, are communicated through directive expressions in the city. Traffic flows, dates and times of performances, location of destination points are all sited within signage.

Viewing the 'image space' turns to the economic transaction as spectacle within the city-like microcosm of the modern shopping mall. Surveillance of individual in the privatized 'public' space causes the production and dissemination of millions of images across the individual's conscious and subconscious eye.

Deterioration of advertising imagery only catches the consumer's gaze more frequently. Oddities in the two-dimensional realm perplex and titillate the masses while denying the existence of an advertising "regime".

The thick image space also exists as a profit-making venture. Newstands and other commercial establishments create a perceptual window into many different published worlds, yet the physical format of the display causes an architectural space determinant.

Multiple viewpoints are the norm in the city. Television as a non-interactive mode of communication causes the multiplicity to be diminished.

Positioning of visual elements creates the spaces of the city.

The layering of image space occurs as one travels through the city. It is a rare occurrence to view advertising or signage perpendicular to the picture plane. The assemblage of actual context versus optical environment causes a semiotic strain leading city dwellers to proceed with their daily travels in a somewhat distracted manner. It is not necessary, or desirable, to examine every image encountered.

Light is necessary for vision, and nighttime advertising signage depends heavily upon illumination. Architecture cowers in the darkness, temporarily erased from the image of the city. Signs combine to create a collage-like view of color and luminosity.

Graphic symbols unite the visual language of every modern city. Spoken and written words, smells, tastes, and climates are not universalized in the way that today's graphic communications are. An airport is an airport, and a traffic signal, a sign indicating a women's bathroom or a poison symbol on a bottle 'read' as well in Tokyo as they do in New York, Singapore, and Madrid.

strip city



The Space of Architecture
Meaning as Presence and Representation



sharon a. steinberg

strip city

The Space of Architecture
Meaning as Presence and Representation

sharon a. steinberg

Cover photograph:
Northbound on Kirby Drive
toward Interstate 59.
Generalized and specific
contents overlap to
create a dense visual field as
one approaches strip city.



Production, as well as consumption, provide multiple two-dimensional contexts along Houston's highway access roads.

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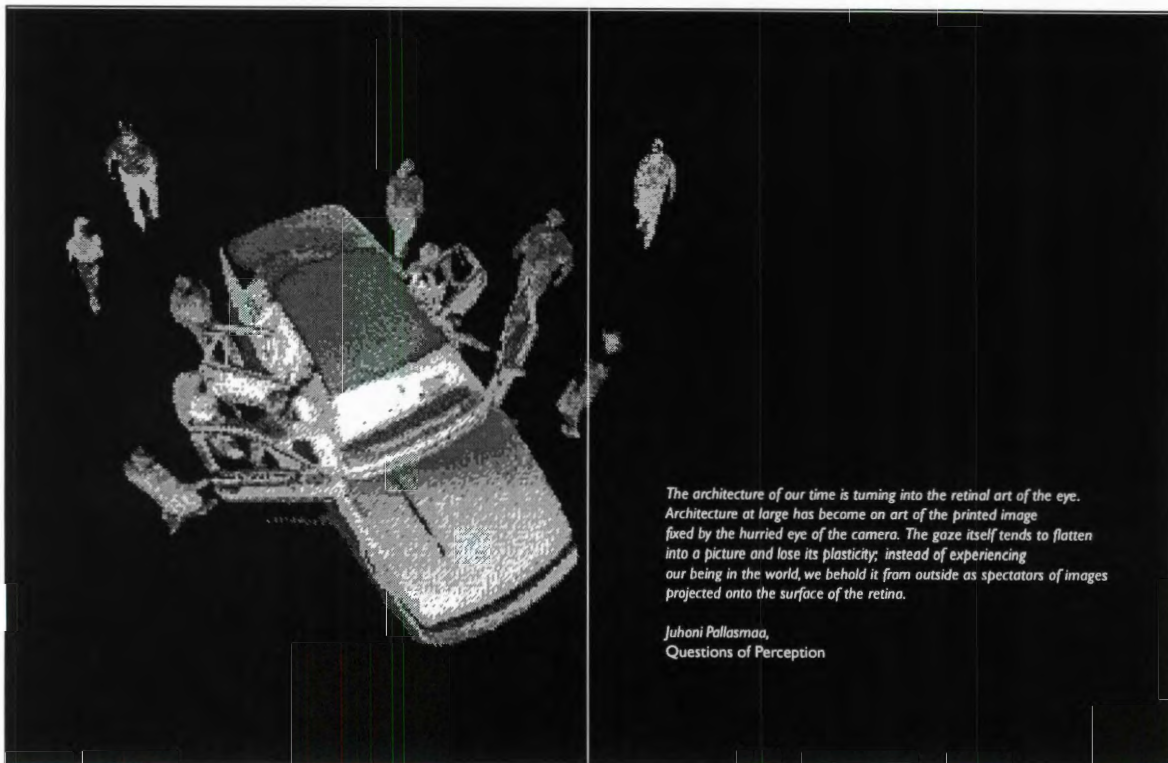
Mirror as view device for juxtaposition

A Final Look

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Sources

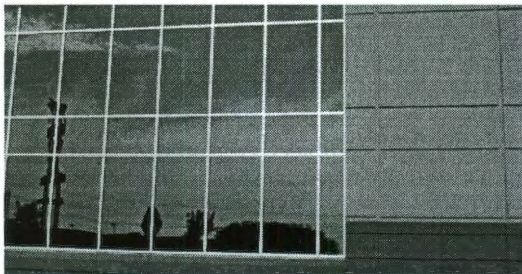
Colophon



The architecture of our time is turning into the retinal art of the eye. Architecture at large has become an art of the printed image fixed by the hurried eye of the camera. The gaze itself tends to flatten into a picture and lose its plasticity; instead of experiencing our being in the world, we behold it from outside as spectators of images projected onto the surface of the retina.

*Juhani Pallasmaa,
Questions of Perception*

Bank United Building
 Located at highway 59 at
 Greenway Plaza.
 This recent bank building
 reinforces the two-dimen-
 sional, plastic qualities which
 define Houston's feeder roads.
 Constant commercial
 development employs
 surface-oriented materials to
 convey "image" rather than
 solidity or permanence.



Introduction

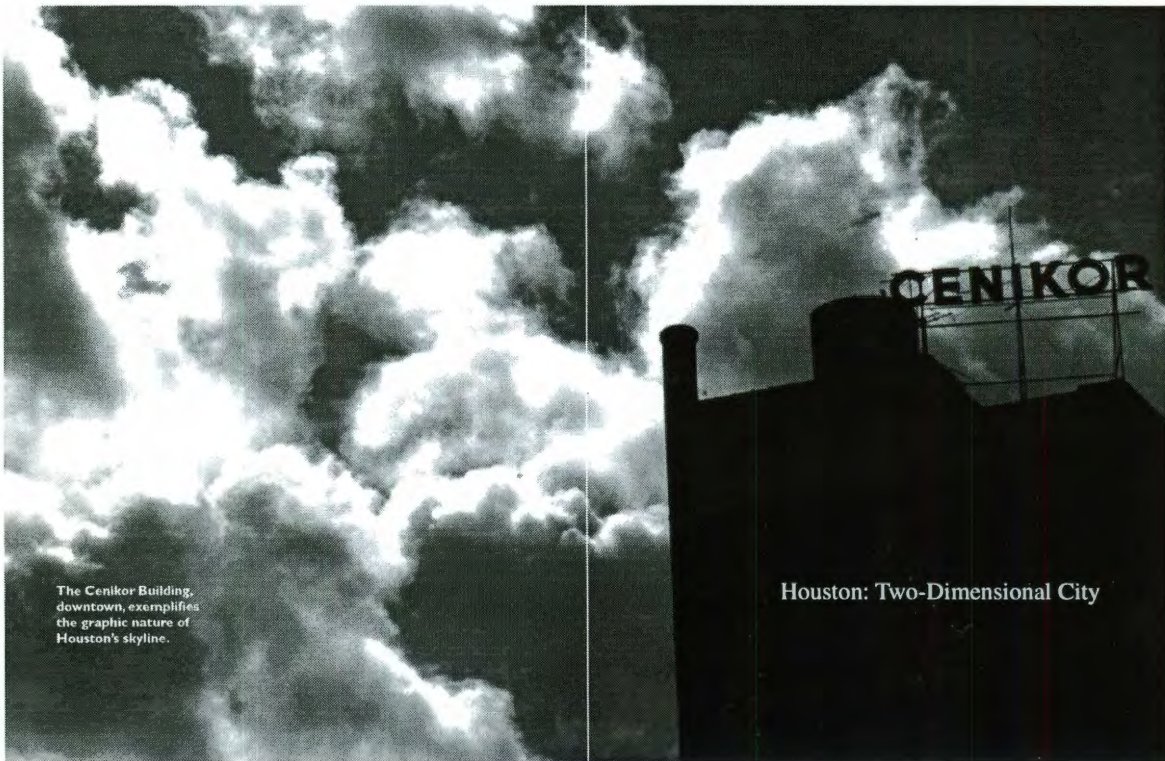
The city of Houston, as many other semi-planned American cities of the twentieth century, has gained a reliance upon the automobile. Use of the automobile has shaped many building types while the structure of the highway has bisected large areas of the city, both vertically and horizontally. One of the many results is a lack of definite scale between buildings, cars, people, and the highway.

As buildings lose their plasticity and their connection to the scale of the human body, they become isolated into the realm of vision. With the loss of scale also comes the loss of tactility. Buildings lose detail once crafted for the human body or hand, and the structures become flattened, sharp-edged, immaterial and seemingly unreal.

Aesthetic, programmatic, and communicated possibilities merge with the space of the highway and create the strip cities so common in Houston. Studying these strip cities through strictly the visual realm can simultaneously contrast audience, context, speed, or the overall two-dimensionality of Houston.

This book represents an effort to make a substantial qualification of a particular strip city along Houston's Interstate 59. The two-dimensional structure, appearance, and workings of the strip city have come together in text, image, and in the structure and pacing of this book.

By harnessing the realm of vision as a source for this investigation, I hope to extract the visual relationships in a two-dimensional format which have been overlooked in the actual strip city.



The Cenikor Building, downtown, exemplifies the graphic nature of Houston's skyline.

Houston: Two-Dimensional City

Location of signage in Houston depends upon the availability of visual pathways, both on and off the highway.

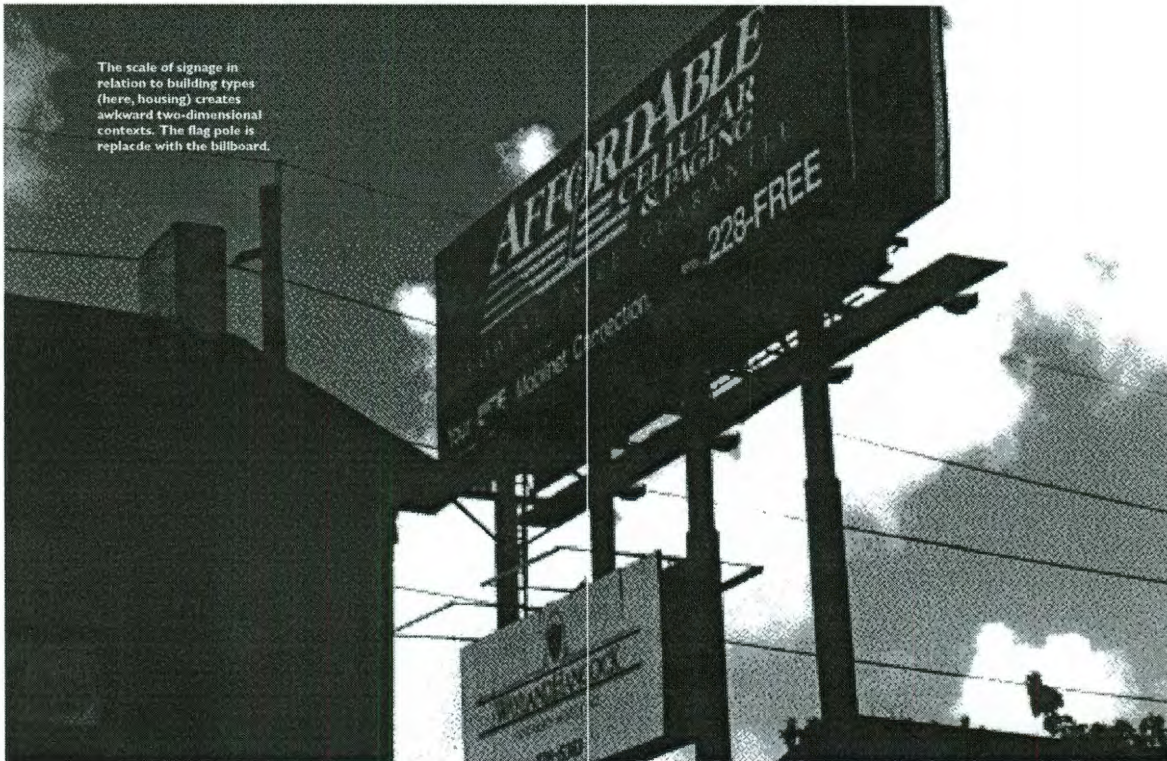
A heavy reliance upon the automobile has led to a proliferation of two-dimensional advertising imagery throughout the Houston area geared towards the occupants of the automobile. The scale of the city has shifted due to high speeds and great distances. Signs for Burger King, What-a-Burger, Jack-in-the-Box, McDonald's, Wendy's, and Sonic Burger, just to name a few, can be viewed from up to one mile away from the location of the actual restaurant. High traffic areas provide a 24 hour audience for advertising messages.

Strips of retail development have sprouted along the pathways of the mass audience—FM 1960, Westheimer, Post Oak, Kirby, Holcombe, and on the feeder roads of all the major Houston highways. At the periphery of these commercial strips lie individual businesses which rely heavily upon their own, unique image as the major selling point.

The tendency toward material consumption as the dominant form of recreation in Houston has manipulated the landscape and created varying zones of commercial activity. The density of two-dimensional imagery in the more active commercial zones is noticeably higher than of less commercially oriented zones. One 'built' indicator relating to these commercial zones in Houston is signage.



The scale of signage in relation to building types (here, housing) creates awkward two-dimensional contexts. The flag pole is replaced with the billboard.



The sign embodies the duality of today's urban visual landscape as a culmination between architecture and graphic design. While existing as a three-dimensional object in space, the graphic quality maintains resonance as an indicator of location and of program.

Signage is most easily identifiable according to its placement in relation to the human body and the field of vision. Scale becomes one relational factor which separates Houston's signage from that of most urban landscapes, in that larger formats of signage are used (the super-billboard) and may be placed in unusual positions within the city; on rooftops, seven-story steel poles, etc.

Appropriateness of signage to type of activity has been strictly enforced through the use of the Uniform Building Code and its Houston-specific guidelines. The variety of signage types in existence constantly push the interpretations of these codes. Subtler 'aesthetic' codes also fall into play in the design of signage. Context, scale, color, location, height, illumination, legibility, information load, and overall appearance are all aesthetic classifications a successful urban sign must grapple with.

Signage typology and visibility, as categories of investigation, can lead to an interpretive taxonomy of Houston signage. But, ultimately, the acceptance of groupings of signs and of architecture can constitute their own visual context. •



Increases in mobility create more of a necessity for bold, recognizable signage.



Architectural structures serve multiple purposes—shelter, signage, and icon.



Often, the facades of buildings along strip developments and feeder roads are angled toward the flow of traffic.



Both permanent and changeable signage respond to varying flows of traffic from highway to local movement.



STRIP CITY is a place where certain view points provide visual and physical depth. The deepest spaces occur perpendicular to the flow of traffic on the highway. One can never really appreciate these views travelling at high speeds.

Slow down.

Look at the spaces and how they become a literal and visual context in space.

STRIP CITY can be defined in numerous ways. It's meaning in the context of this thesis project refers to the traditional "strip" commercial developments so often discussed by architects, developers, business owners, franchisers, and consumers today.

STRIP CITY implies an urban space which has been "stripped down" to bare essentials, or a space where the previous context has been completely "stripped away", creating a new landscape.



billboard blocking facade
• monumental signage •
lack of scale between
landscape and speed of
highway traffic

Strip cities mostly occur on highway access roads. The particular strip city I am focusing on is located along Houston's highway 59, roughly between the intersections of Westway (near Greenway Plaza) and Greenbriar. Approximately a two mile stretch.

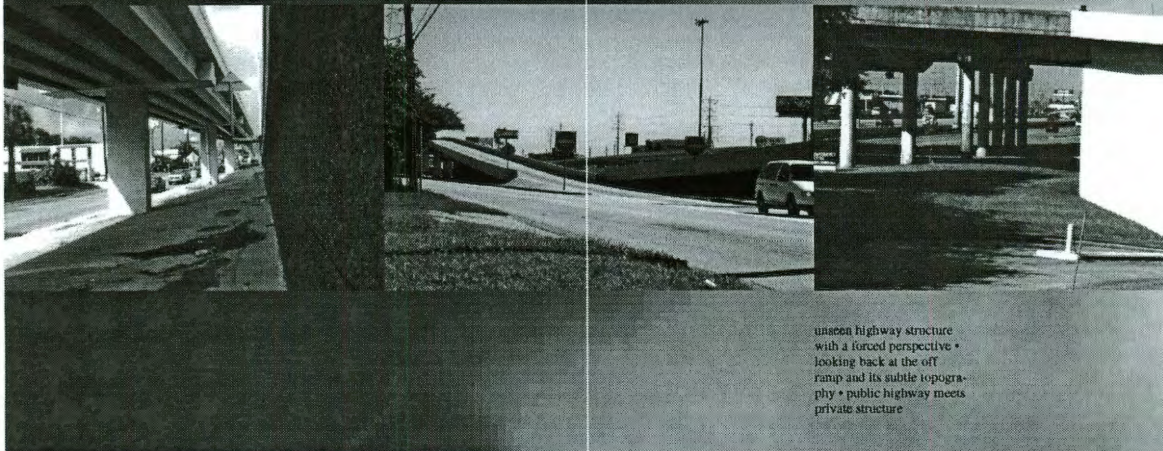
By existing in the three-dimensional urban space, but being primarily comprised of two-dimensional contexts, such as signage or other graphic means, strip city is relegated to the realm of vision.



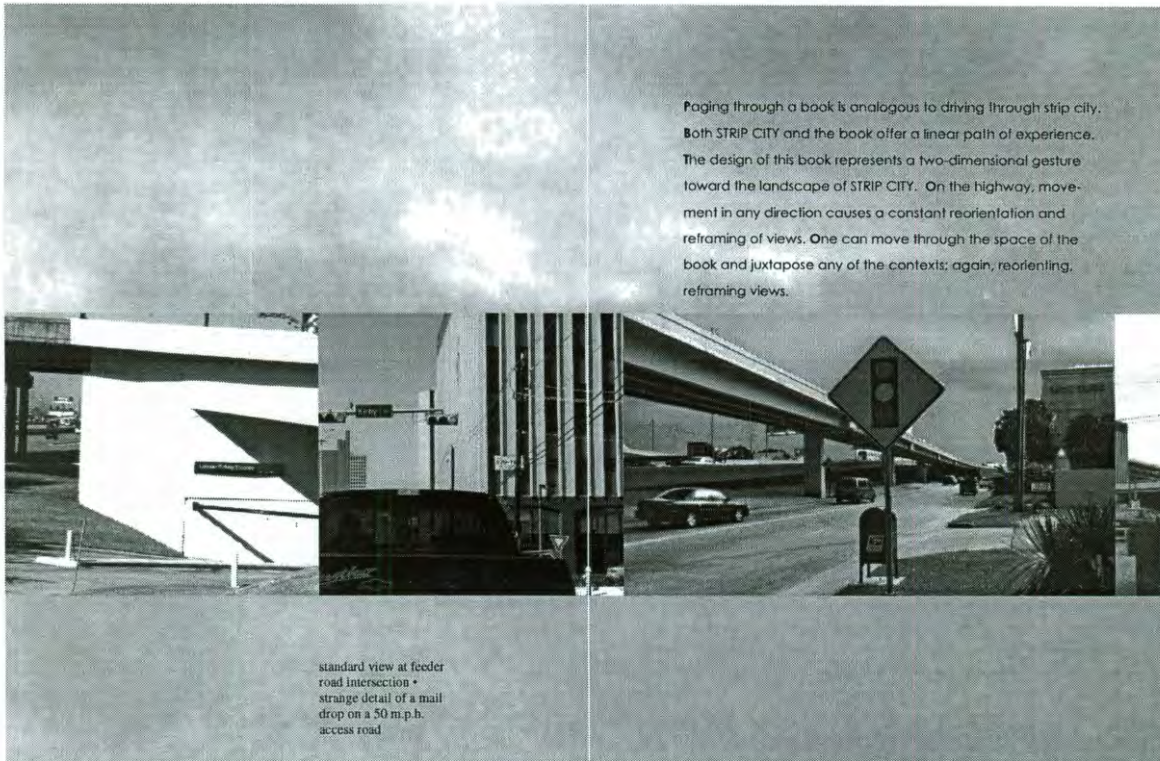
dramatic landscape filled
with information •
bizarre views perpen-
dicular to the highway

By combining word and image in multiple formats, strip city can be liberated into a completely two-dimensional context where its visual relationships can be understood, and perhaps acted upon. Harnessing the realm of vision as a source for this investigation will offer a new way of understanding the spaces of strip city.

The book format being used for this investigation relies, primarily, upon photography, typography, and graphic symbols to capture, process, and disseminate the visual "information" found in the site.



unseen highway structure
with a forced perspective •
looking back at the off
ramp and its subtle topogra-
phy • public highway meets
private structure

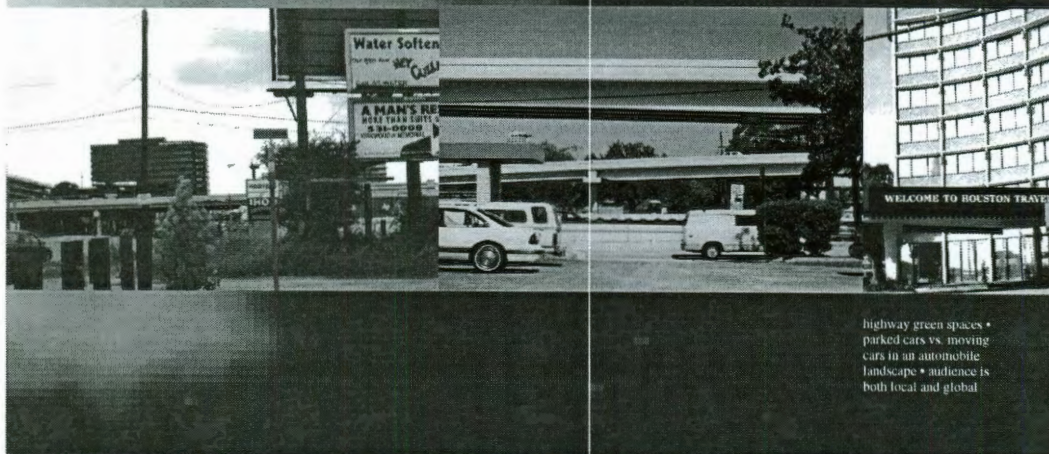


Paging through a book is analogous to driving through strip city. Both STRIP CITY and the book offer a linear path of experience. The design of this book represents a two-dimensional gesture toward the landscape of STRIP CITY. On the highway, movement in any direction causes a constant reorientation and reframing of views. One can move through the space of the book and juxtapose any of the contexts; again, reorienting, reframing views.

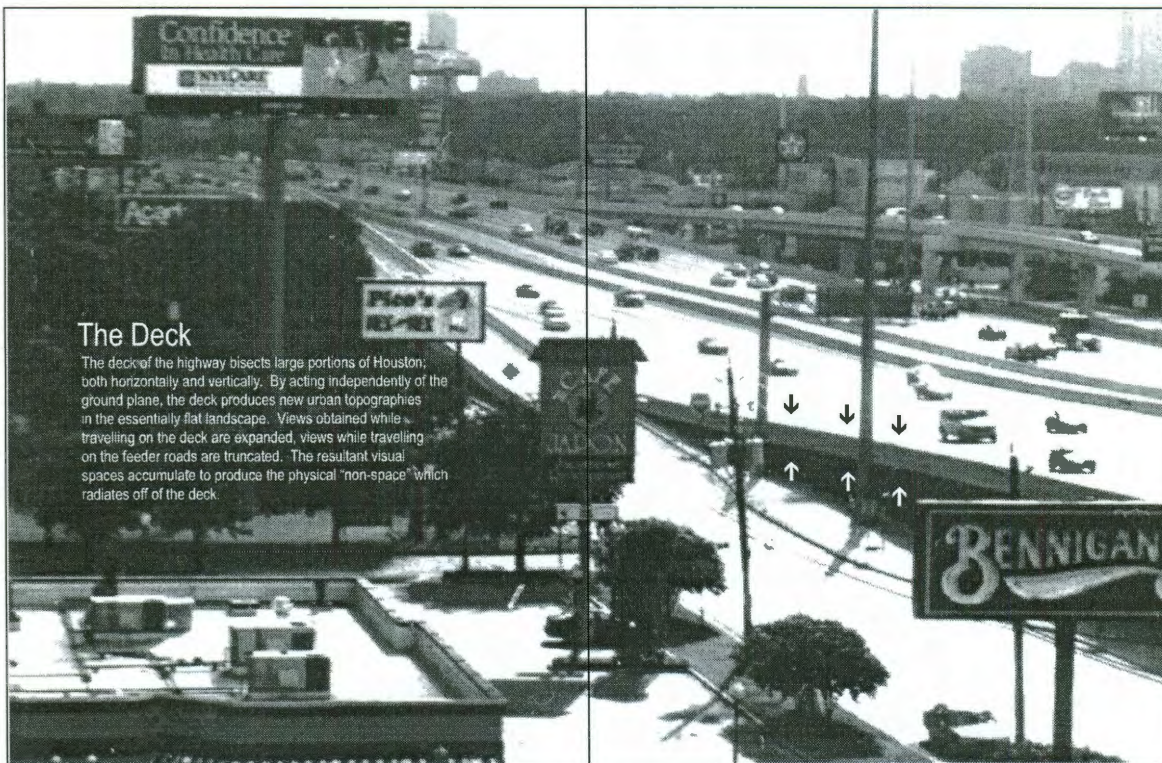
standard view at feeder
road intersection •
strange detail of a mail
drop on a 50 m.p.h.
access road

The density of graphic information in STRIP CITY lends to "flatten the visual depth of space." Buildings in this space appear flattened and the images of the book represent this two dimensionality.

The fluid information deployment I draws a parallel between driver and reader with the constant shift of "active vision" or areas of visual interest. Related to the frame of the photograph and the windshield, the book retains object quality while mediating the new visual experience of the highway.



highway green spaces •
parked cars vs. moving
cars in an automobile
landscape • audience is
both local and global



The Deck

The deck of the highway bisects large portions of Houston, both horizontally and vertically. By acting independently of the ground plane, the deck produces new urban topographies in the essentially flat landscape. Views obtained while travelling on the deck are expanded, views while travelling on the feeder roads are truncated. The resultant visual spaces accumulate to produce the physical "non-space" which radiates off of the deck.



Visual Pathway through

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②

③

④

⑤

Strip City

⑦

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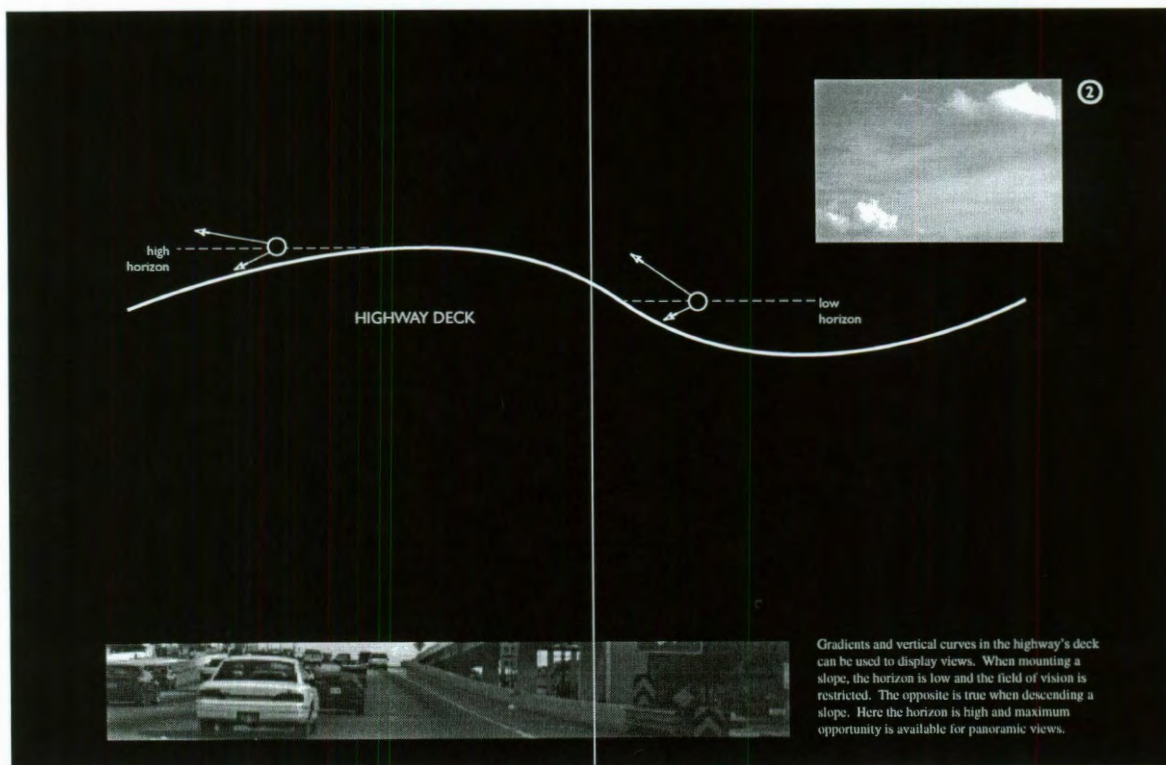
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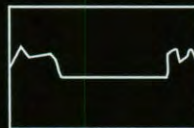
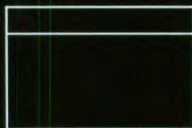
Placing viewpoints in strip city on the deck or on the feeder road is obvious as far as physical location. Once visual pathways are uncovered, our understanding of the two-dimensional workings of these developments begins. (text and images based on observations found in McCluskey's *Roadform*.)

○





The shift in the relation of the horizon line in relation to the field of vision becomes exaggerated at particular points of the path through strip city. The most prominent change occurs at the on and off ramps



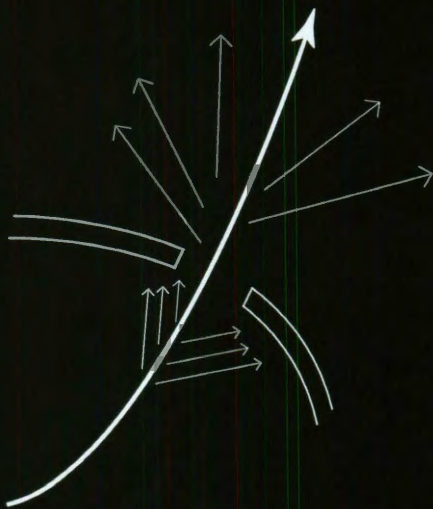
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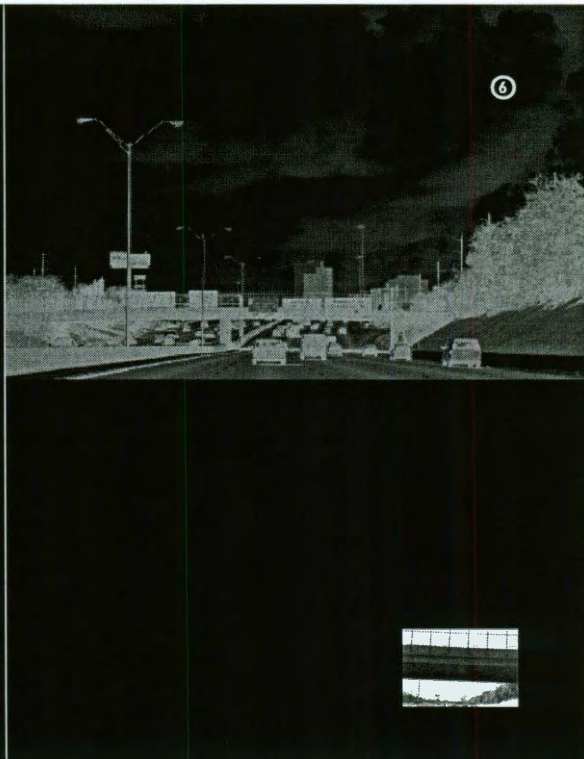
One factor increasing the difficulty of judging speed and distance on the highway is the large proportion of the view which is occupied by the sky and the road surface. The expanse of sky also tends to visually compress views below it, especially below the apparent horizon.



The relative motion of objects to each other and their variations in size depending on their distance from the driver can result in the allusion of an elaborate dance being performed in the landscape. Objects approach and recede, grow and diminish in size. They draw near and away from each other, reverse position, disappear and then reappear in a new form.



The contrast between wide and narrow is emphasized by the vertical "walls" created by an overpass or large sign structure. A notable event occurs in the visual pathway when one approaches and goes under the structure. A release is enjoyed when one can sight the uncontained view.





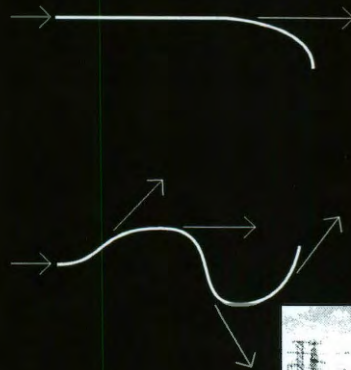
The highway itself is conceived as moving through the environment of strip city. When seen this way, it is necessary that any changes in direction are visually explained. A sense of correctness and of easy flow is felt when a visual cue prompts changes in position of structures or changes in highway topography.

7





The driver's vision, versus the passenger's, is directed along the path of the highway and all the important views are arranged in this direction. At the same time, secondary transverse views interest the passenger's of the vehicle.





9



An overlap may occur so that one view comes into the line of sight before the previous one has disappeared. This condition occurs both on and off the deck. Sights can be understood as goals and the possibility of a series of short term visual goals can be achieved while the long-term goals is intermittently visible.

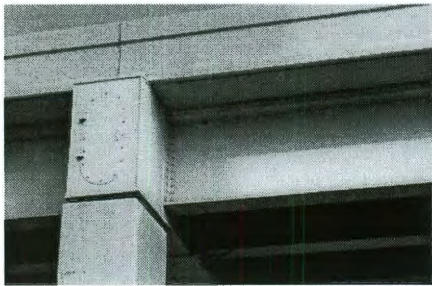


By slowing down the spaces of strip city, previously unknown sights emerge. Beholding objects which are passed by during our everyday travels brings a new consciousness of space, visibility, and perspective. These views neglect the larger context. By isolating and analyzing these views, the interstitial spaces of strip city become just as important as buildings, signs, lights, and cars. For, without these spaces, both the highway and resultant development would not exist in the physical or visual realm.

Taking an object from its three-dimensional context through capturing the light it reflects creates a new, two-dimensional visual realm based on the artifacts of strip city.



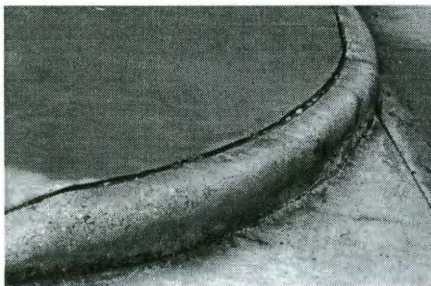
Hidden forces. Bend metal, warping from speed of highway travel.



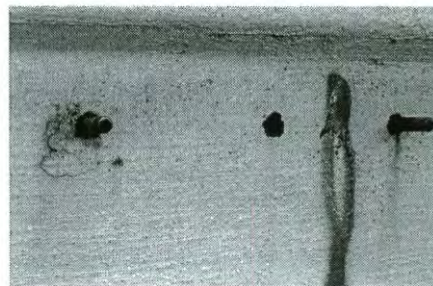
Connective qualities. Highly particular placement of rivets and bolts create graphic detail where no user could every see.



Sediment over time. Staining of concrete surface has taken place over decades. No human residues apparent.



Cutting forces. Curb cut whose shape is a clear result of the automobile turn radius refers back to a sidewalk never used.



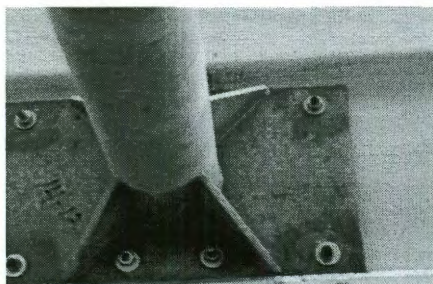
Protruding elements. The monolithic quality if the highway structure disintegrates once speed is reduced.



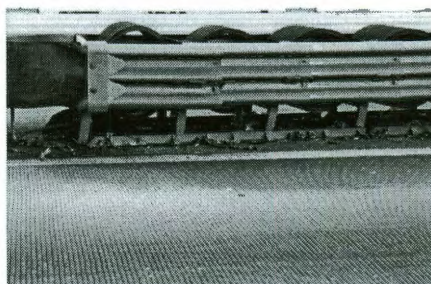
Settling of soil. Highway materials sink and sag into the Houston clay-soil.

Textures and the tactility so often lost or disregarded in strip city surface into art-like visions with dynamic compositions. By framing these deep visual cues, the idea of the highway structure can be raised into the realm of aesthetic acceptance. A sense of scale to the human body, eye, and hand can be reformed by stepping outside of the car and beholding these spaces.

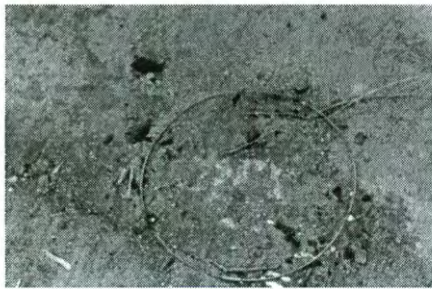
Knowledge of material quality also lend a sense of time to the spaces of this development which have no particular program assigned to them. Nonspecific to this strip city, or even to Houston, these views also represent one facet of vision effected by increased mobility.



Handcrafting. Evidence of the human hand in notation of sign structure.



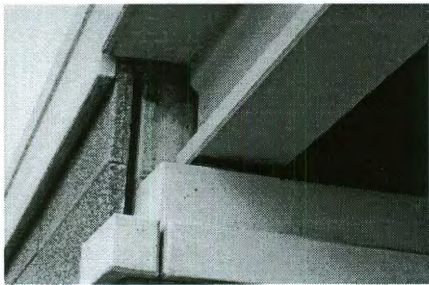
Sideline structures. Safety structures offer rare details never encountered by the eye.



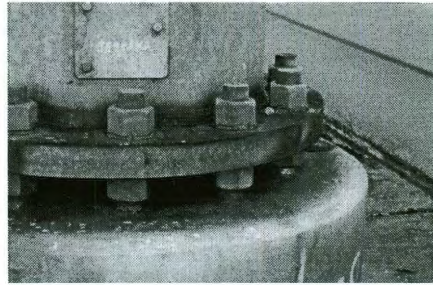
Geometry. Circles appear all over strip city but are only noticed when commercialized.



Forces of materials. The innate characteristics of cement and temperature fluctuations.



Veneer. Beautification of highway structures coupled with formal beauty of actual connections.



Super-sized elements. Flat-sized bolts hold the highway lamps in place.



Genlle curves. Beauty in the spaces of strip city so often overlooked.

2404

The Flattened Space

Building materials in strip city tend to flatten the appearance of building facades. Curtain wall construction relies upon two-dimensionality, moveability, lightness, and its two-dimensional membrane-like qualities to survive in strip city. By peeling away a dimension, we can explode particular built relationships. Producing two-dimensional representations of a three-dimensional world can reveal more than the actual construction.



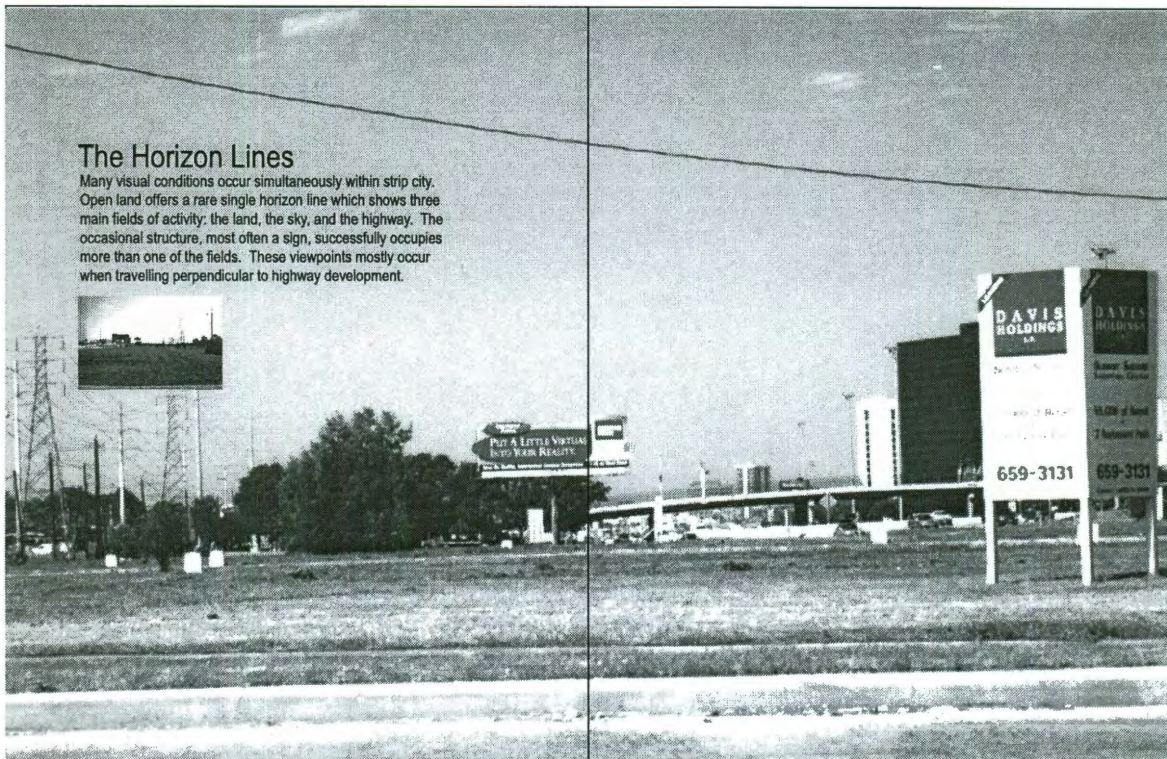


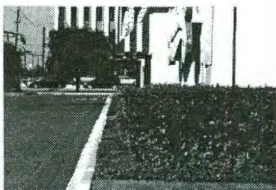
The Overlap

Jamming together disparate programs onto visually cramped sites occurs along the feeder roads of strip city. The visual competition which results gives a visual density not seen in other areas of the city. Multiple media at many different scales compete, overlap, recede and reappear to the audience travelling through strip city.

The Horizon Lines

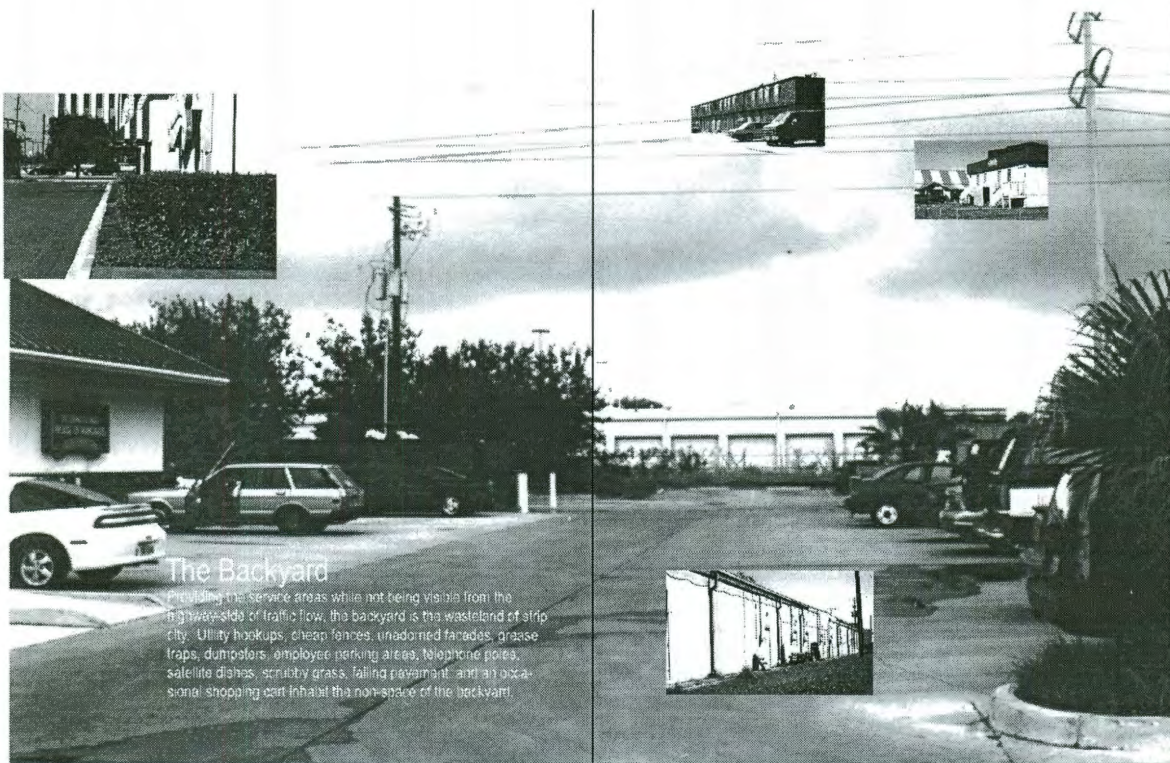
Many visual conditions occur simultaneously within strip city. Open land offers a rare single horizon line which shows three main fields of activity: the land, the sky, and the highway. The occasional structure, most often a sign, successfully occupies more than one of the fields. These viewpoints mostly occur when travelling perpendicular to highway development.

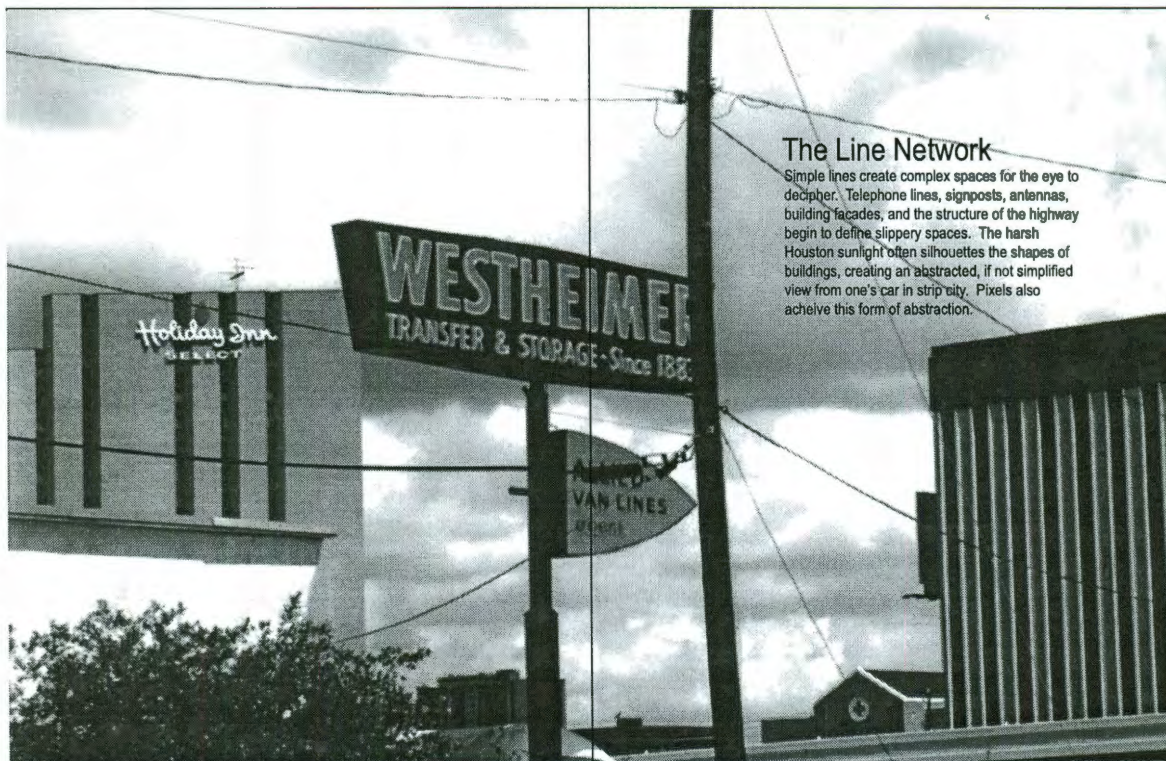




The Backyard

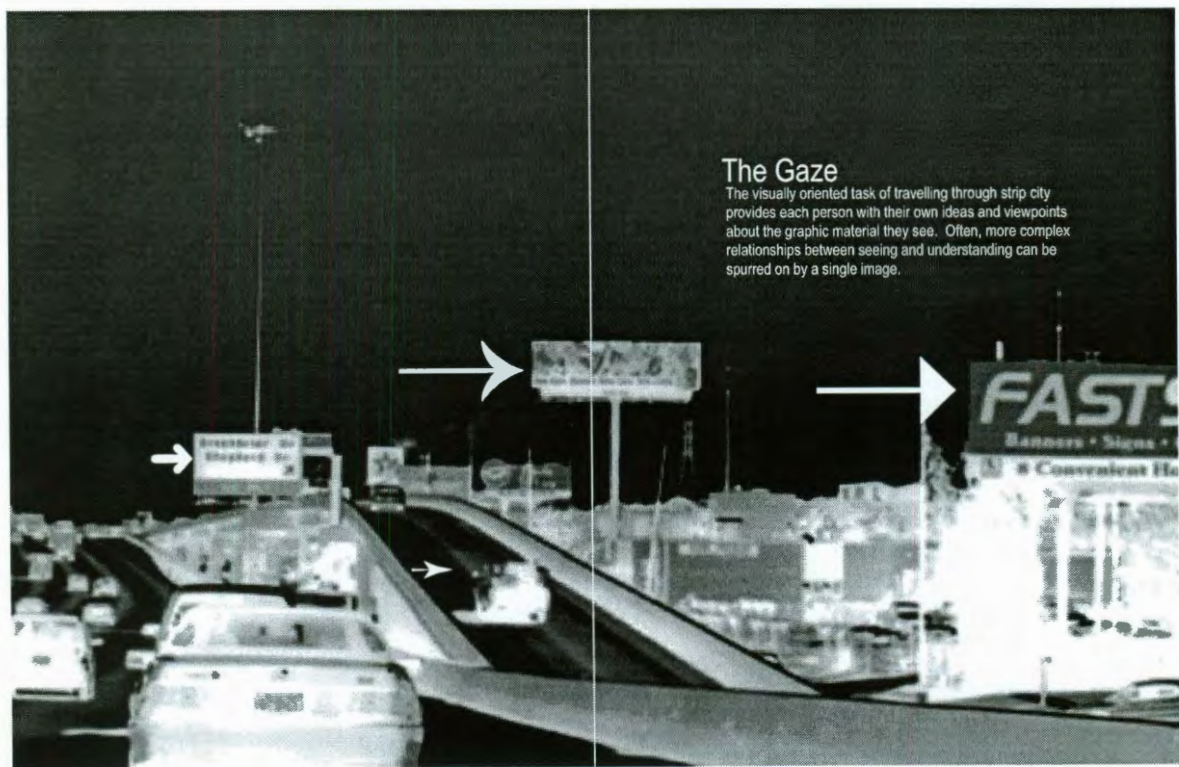
Providing the service areas while not being visible from the highway side of traffic flow, the backyard is the wasteland of strip city. Utility hookups, cheap fences, unadorned facades, grease traps, dumpsters, employee parking areas, telephone poles, satellite dishes, scrubby grass, falling pavement, and an occasional shopping cart inhabit the non-space of the backyard.





The Line Network

Simple lines create complex spaces for the eye to decipher. Telephone lines, signposts, antennas, building facades, and the structure of the highway begin to define slippery spaces. The harsh Houston sunlight often silhouettes the shapes of buildings, creating an abstracted, if not simplified view from one's car in strip city. Pixels also achieve this form of abstraction.



The Gaze

The visually oriented task of travelling through strip city provides each person with their own ideas and viewpoints about the graphic material they see. Often, more complex relationships between seeing and understanding can be spurred on by a single image.

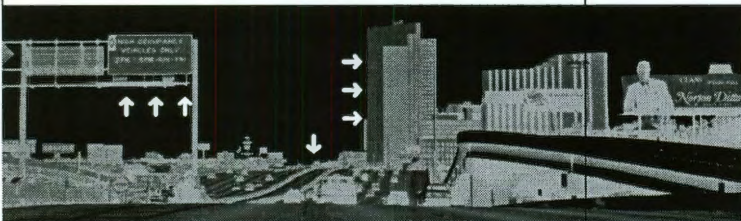
Highway Landmarks

Landmarks assist the driver to orient himself in strip city and enable him to gauge his progress along the highway or feeder road.

Orienting oneself within the space of the city has been a task drastically altered by the invention of the automobile. The lack of scale between the driver of a car and the built environment of the city becomes amplified at the seam between city and highway. Within the realm of strip city, the viewer on the highway deck becomes privileged. In addition, orienting oneself within the space of the highway becomes a purely visual task.

The rising and falling of parallel movements at the on and off ramps starts the visual orientation. It remains clear whether one is located *on* or *off* the deck. Relative scale in relation to other vehicles allows a certain dimension of depth perception and its resultant orientation. Location within the scale of the entire highway relies more upon visual information than actual, physical location of the car on the highway.





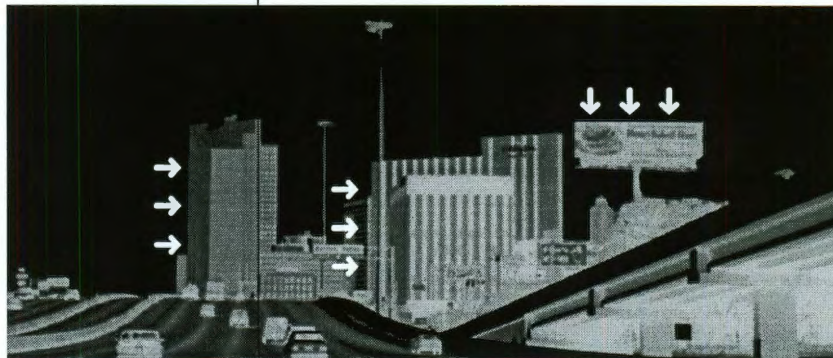
Landmarks afford a visible goal which may be the destination in strip city or a stage along the highway.

Using landmarks such as specific buildings as visual pivot points is one way drivers orient themselves along the path of the highway. In conjunction with signage and the artificial horizon line of the deck, virtual location can be visually triangulated. Being to the left of the sign, to the right of the office building, and heading toward the horizon line is enough information to easily navigate through and with the flows of traffic on the highway.

Orientation becomes clarified further when views include a large swath of land adjacent to the highway structure. Locating oneself in relation to several objects other than neighboring cars along the highway provides a connectivity to strip city as well as the highway.

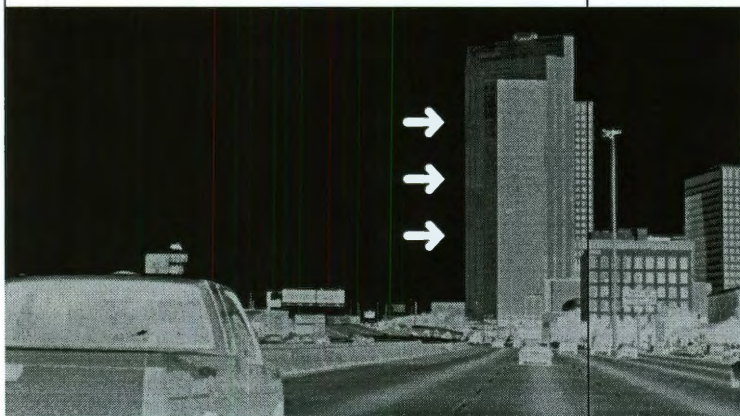
The term *landmark* implies a built form which has significance and is easily recognizable. Landmarks in strip city gain their significance as forms in the field of the sky in section and forms in the field of the city in plan. On a basic level to the audience of strip city, landmarks exist as colors, patterns, and shapes. Due to the speed of travel along the deck, little else is visually discernible about the landmark. When travelling along the feeder road, landmarks such as signs dissolve into nondescript piers. Office towers go unnoticed until feeder road traffic is passing by the base of the building.

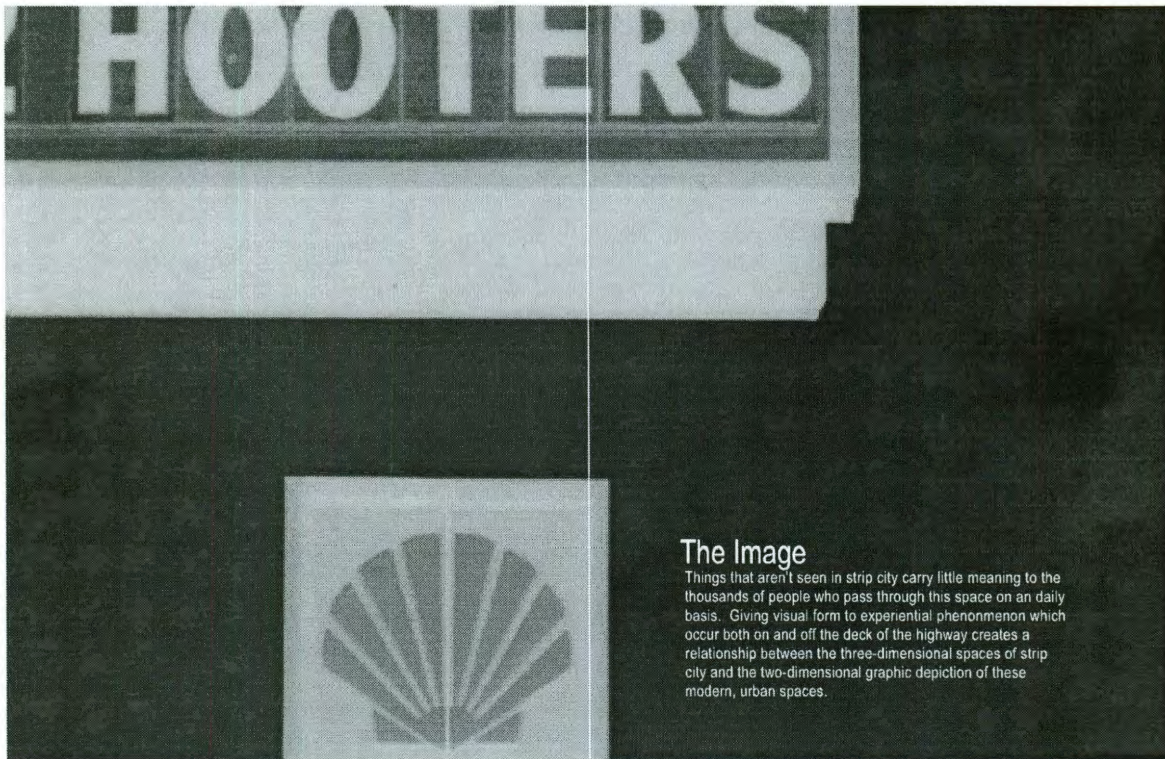
Landmarks help to articulate the route. If a series of landmarks becomes visible as progress is made, a mental image of strip city as being divided into stretches is formed.



The primary characteristics of landmarks within strip city are substantial elevation from the road surface and isolation within the field of the sky.

The importance of strip city's landmarks relies upon seeing the landmark previous to the exit it is located at. Landmarks of this type rely upon repeated use or need for a visual cue in addition to the traditional cues like signage, advertising, street addresses, etc.





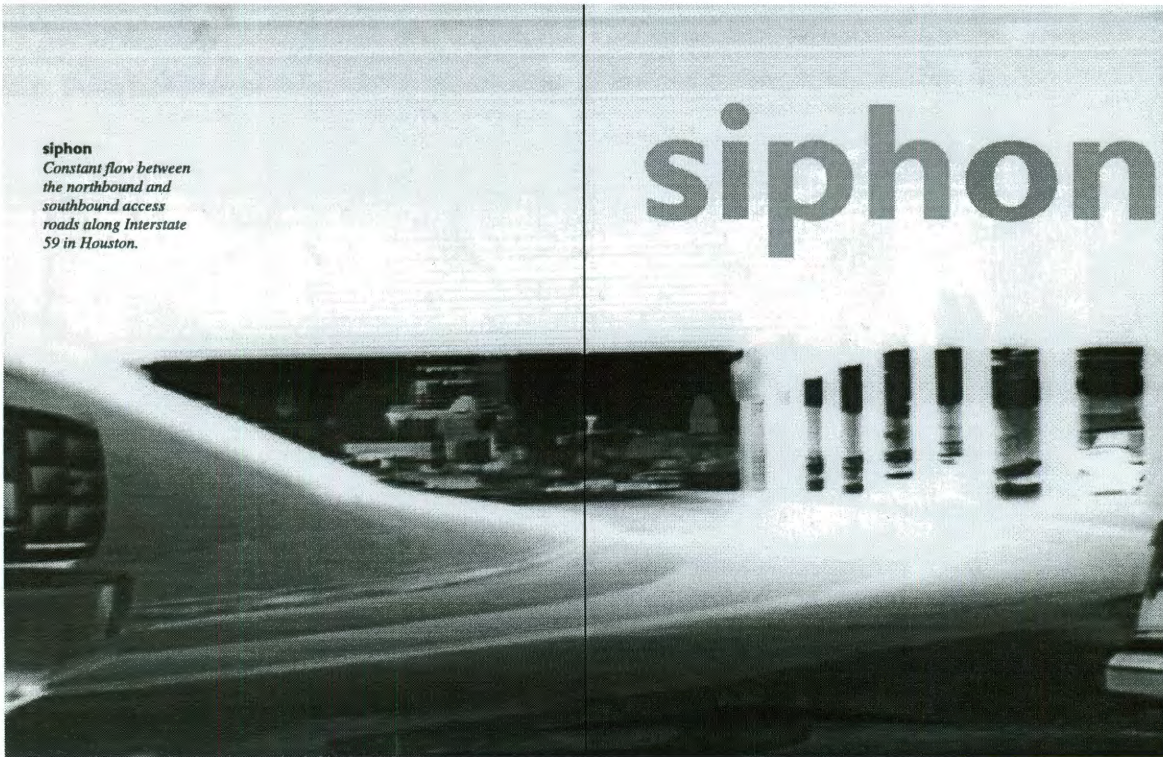
The Image

Things that aren't seen in strip city carry little meaning to the thousands of people who pass through this space on an daily basis. Giving visual form to experiential phenomenon which occur both on and off the deck of the highway creates a relationship between the three-dimensional spaces of strip city and the two-dimensional graphic depiction of these modern, urban spaces.

siphon

*Constant flow between
the northbound and
southbound access
roads along Interstate
59 in Houston.*

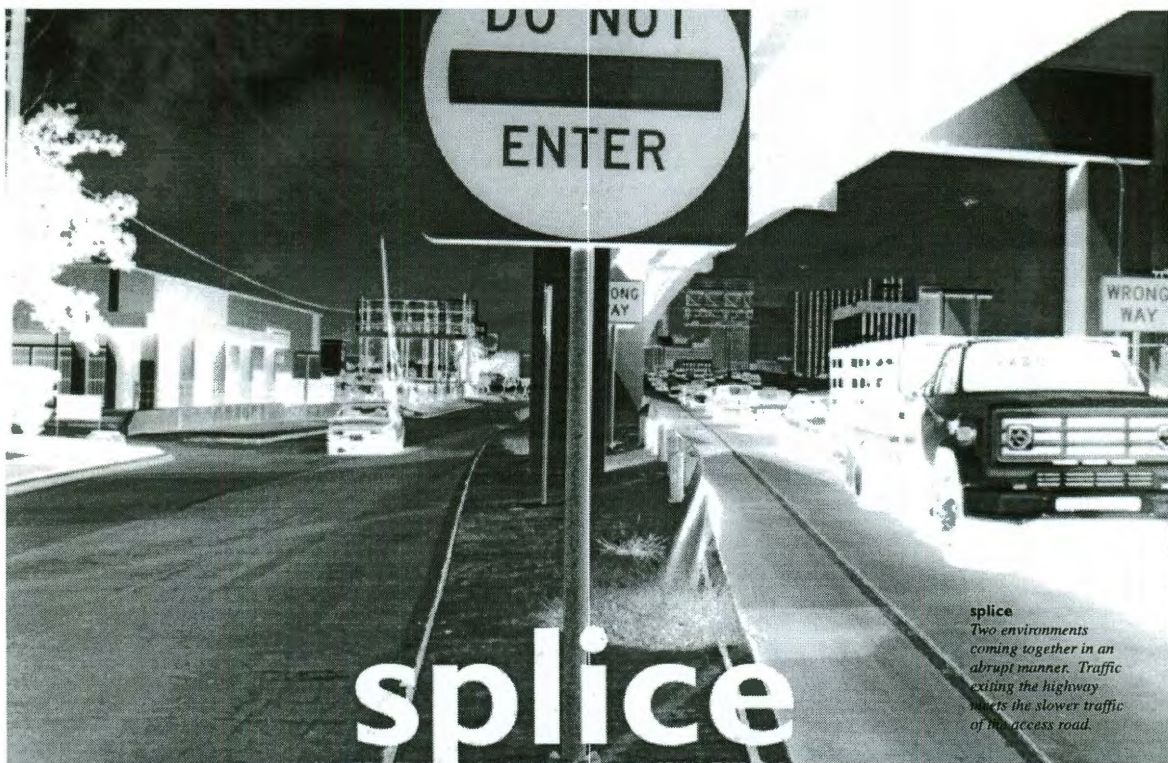
siphon





stripped

*The condition of having
no natural environment.
Having only man-made,
or built environment.*



splice

splice
Two environments
coming together in an
abrupt manner. Traffic
exiting the highway
meets the slower traffic
of the access road.

plank

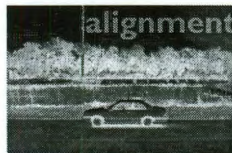
The two-dimensional nature of facades along the highway. From certain viewpoints, these buildings appear to be nothing more than planks emerging from the pavement.

**scale**

Big things that float adjacent to the highway which appear to be small due to the expanse of the highway deck in the field of vision.

**alignment**

The use of traditional relationships of building to street when the context requires a new relationship of building to car.

**depth**

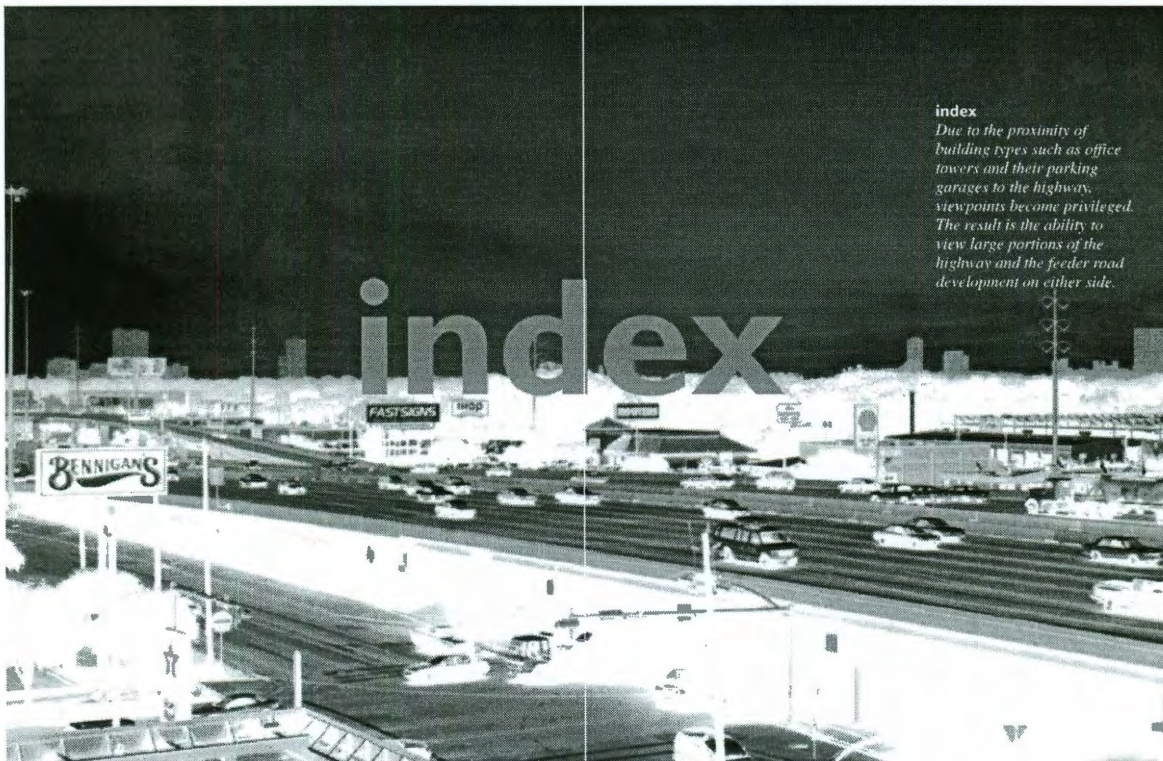
Built forced perspectives which occur when one travels on the access road. The structure of the highway on the left always forces vision to the right.

**image**

Photography can capture a viewpoint quite similar to the field of vision through the windshield of a car. Once one steps outside the space of the car, however, the contextual understanding of the space is altered.

When looking at spaces along the highway, where views are channeled to various forms of signage, collecting images with unusual orientations creates a two-dimensional replication of spaces not previously known or is understood.

Abstraction of photographic images through the use of computer technology causes the viewer to be more critical of the content of the space. In order to evoke meaning from these spaces, naming (quantification/qualification) must take place. The flattening of the images further abstracts relationships which occur along the feeder roads of highway 59.

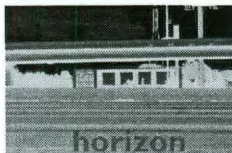


index

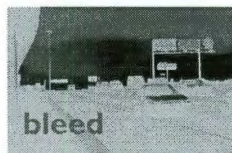
Due to the proximity of building types such as office towers and their parking garages to the highway, viewpoints become privileged. The result is the ability to view large portions of the highway and the feeder road development on either side.

horizon

Replacement of the actual horizon line with multiple horizontal lines. Depending on the orientation of the viewer, any number of horizon lines can be viewed from one location.

**bleed**

Big things that exist simultaneously in and out of the field of vision. A view that surpasses some extent which has been placed upon it.

**surface**

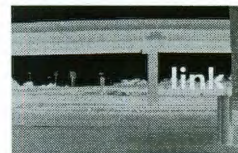
The deck of the highway. All that can be seen while travelling on the deck of the highway is above the surface.

**fault**

The break between the structure of the highway and the local context.

**link**

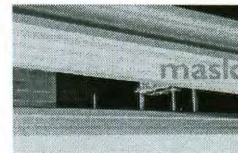
When one can view a space on the other side of the highway structure there is a visual pathway which links the spaces. Physical travel upon this link is impossible.

**consume**

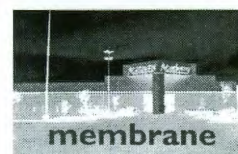
What Houstonians do. An activity linked to the structure of the highway on every level.

**mask**

The structure of the highway often blocks a view of structures (signage) when travelling on the feeder roads.

**membrane**

When an, obviously, solid structure floats in a field of pavement. The structure becomes optically transformed into a lightweight material.



cling




cling
*Location of commercial
development along the high-
way. The marketability of
land flanking the highway for
such establishments.*

format

*The extrusion of both 2D and
3D structures. The reuse of
such structures.*

format



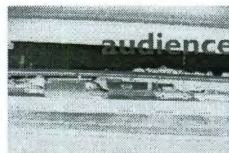
icon

The ability of the building to replace traditional corporate image icons. The building embodies the image.



audience

Recognition that motorists act as an audience and that rush hour traffic is prime time.



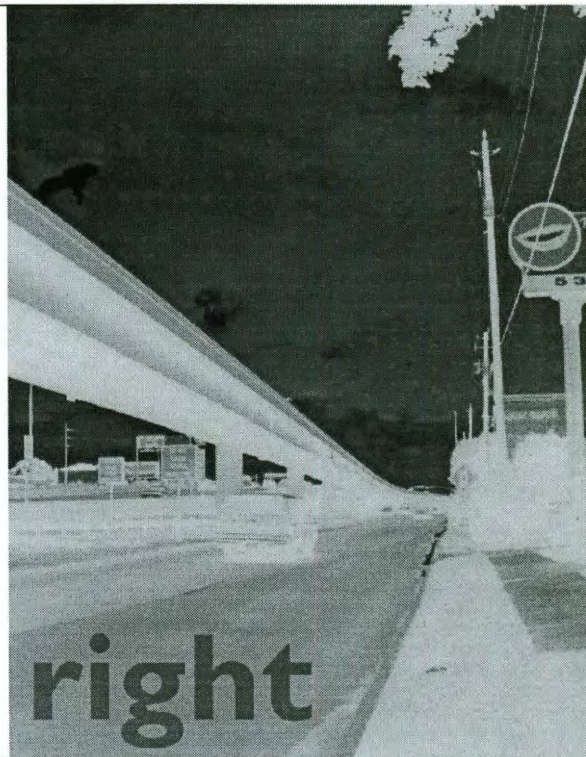
laminate

The forcing together of two disparate contexts. Two streams of traffic with different speeds merge together into one entity on the access road.



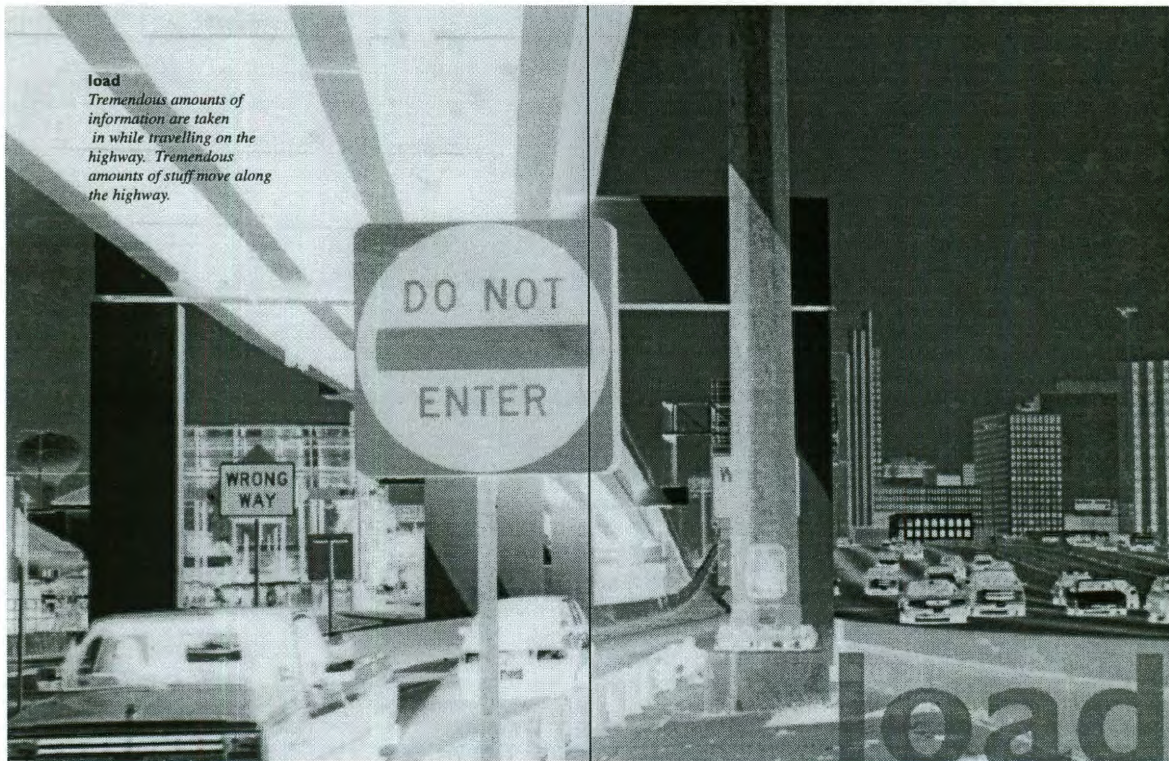
right

Movement on the left, destinations on the right.

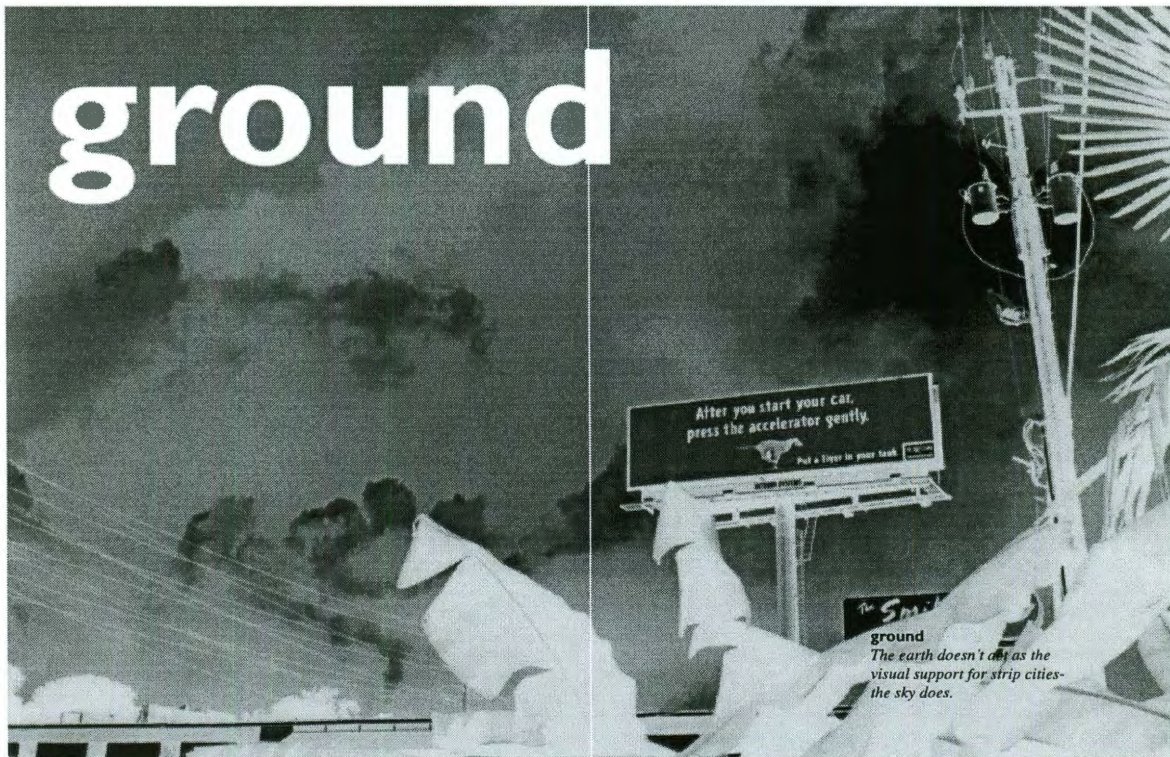


load

Tremendous amounts of information are taken in while travelling on the highway. Tremendous amounts of stuff move along the highway.

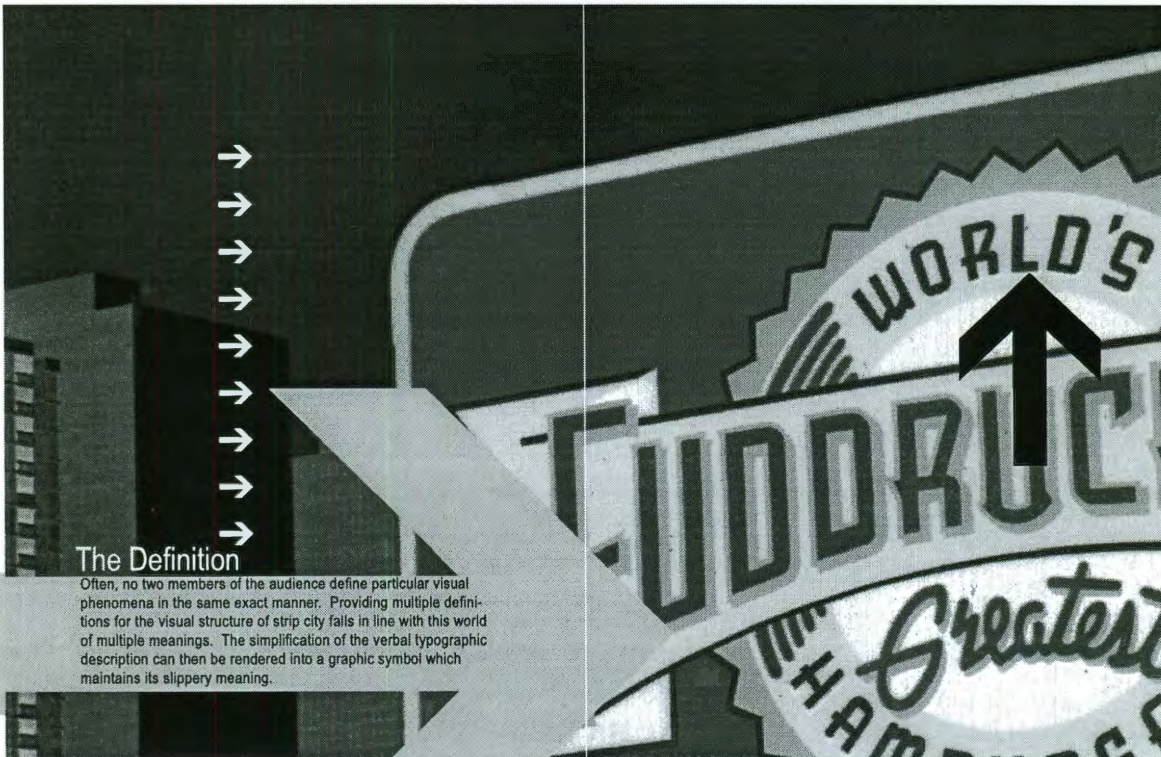


ground



ground

*The earth doesn't act as the
visual support for strip cities-
the sky does.*



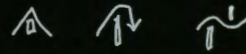
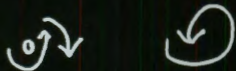
The Definition

Often, no two members of the audience define particular visual phenomena in the same exact manner. Providing multiple definitions for the visual structure of strip city falls in line with this world of multiple meanings. The simplification of the verbal typographic description can then be rendered into a graphic symbol which maintains its slippery meaning.

- something that is set off, has sprung up or has developed from something else
- set back from ground where the highway is built
- replacing one location of a franchise with another



○ → ○ → ○



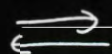
- a bent or curving part
- pressure highway structure exerts on feeder road development
- what happens to the path of travel through strip city

- to draw out and twist
- constant turns towards and away from the highway
- taking the same information and looking at it in a new way



- strip city as a destination
- contribution of money to businesses who capture audience of the highway
- gathering of people and of products

- evenness of traffic on both sides of the highway
- to strike, to exchange
- equalized flow of exit and on ramps



o o o



- the movement of traffic as it falls away from the highway
- rapid acceleration/deceleration and its effect between the highway's surface and tires
- to strip, to shed, to undress
- to renew, to purify
- spots of strip city which are effected by artificial illumination
- path of car as delineated by head lights



~ ~ ~



- visual compression of strip city by neighboring contexts
- a narrow strip
- physical compression of highway by feeder road

- juxtaposition of simultaneous 2d contexts in space and time
- structure of highway and its effect on visual audience
- distortion of weaving threads lengthwise



- a device for separating
- exiting highway requires decisions on which way to turn
- to pass through slowly as on the feeder roads

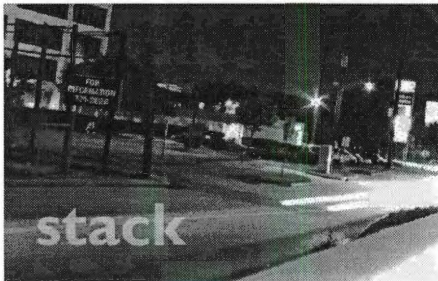
- picking up visual information while travelling through strip city
- to hit with a hard, sweeping blow
- becoming a piece of information while travelling along the highway





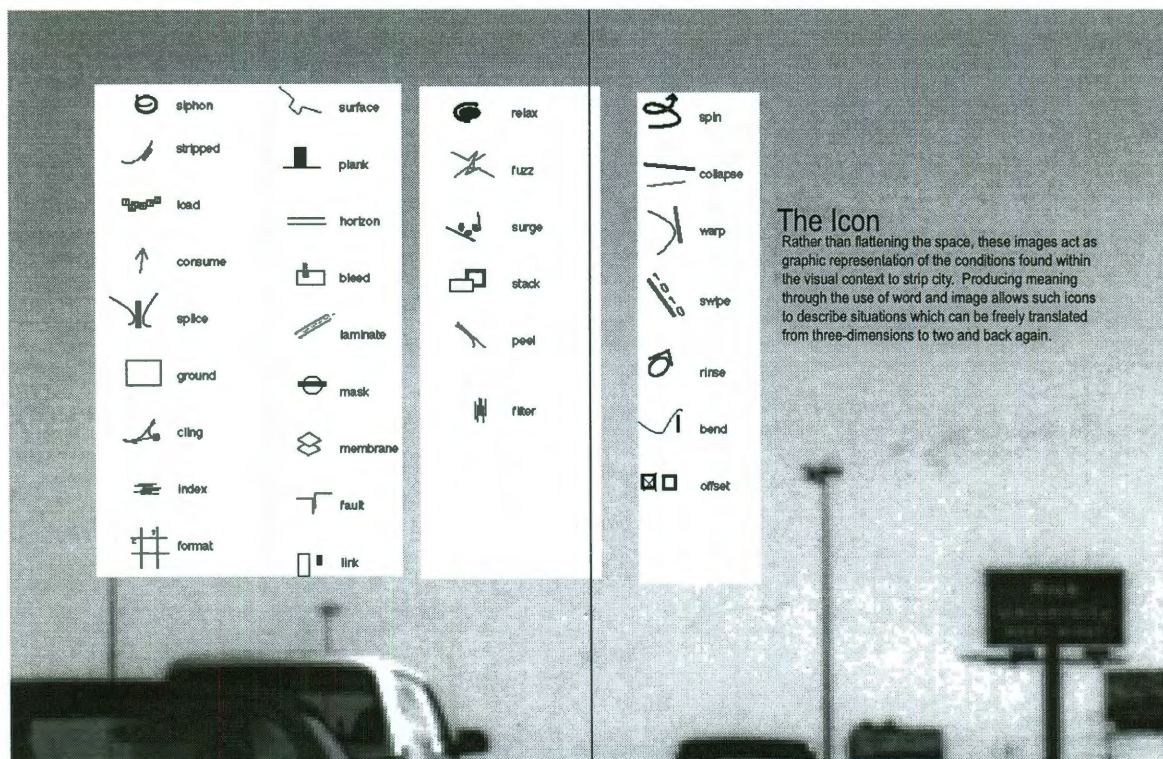
26 Wm LK

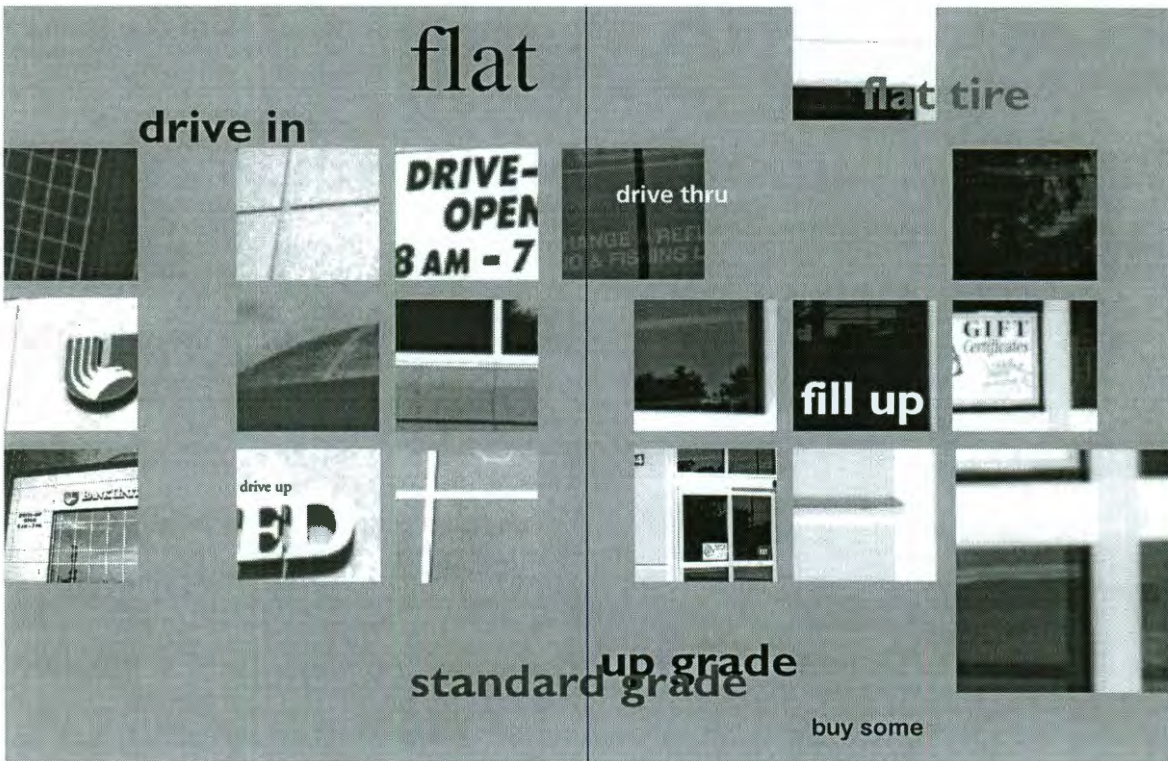
- surveillance of the highway by police
- a collection of loose, light, particles
- disorientation due to lack of visual cues



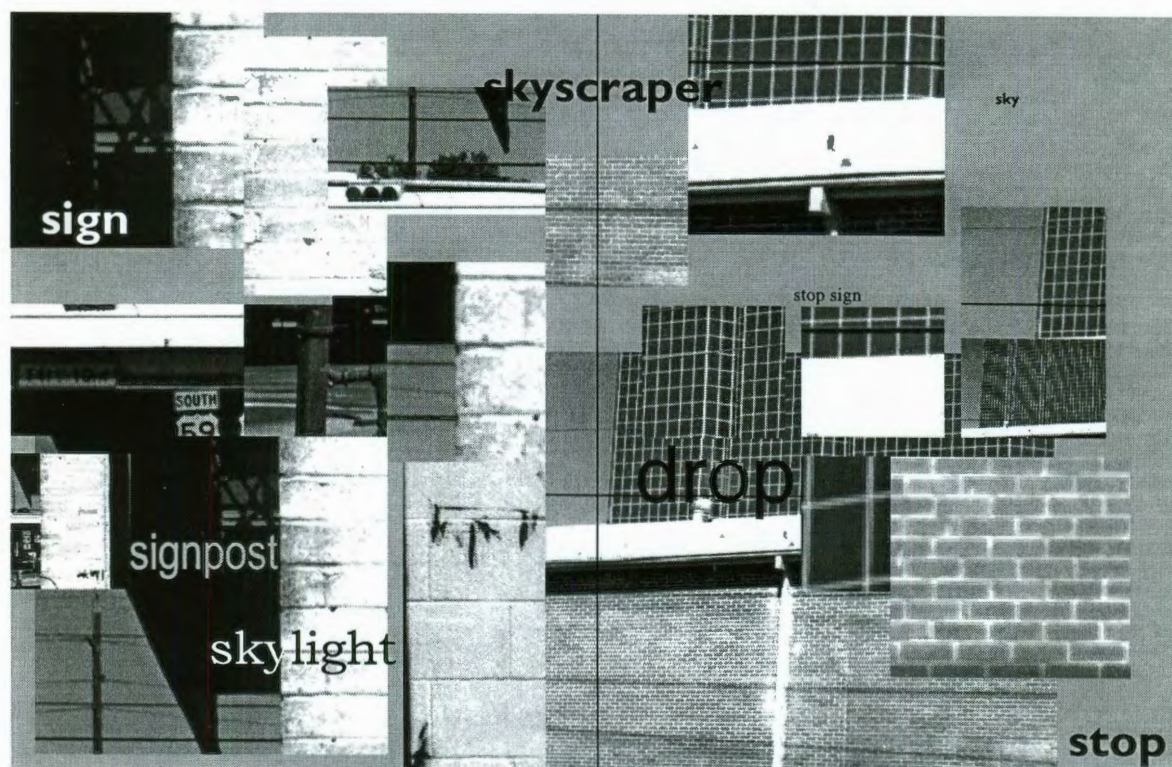
- safety felt when in the familiar environment such as the car
- to accept the environment of strip city
- to take in mentally, to perceive

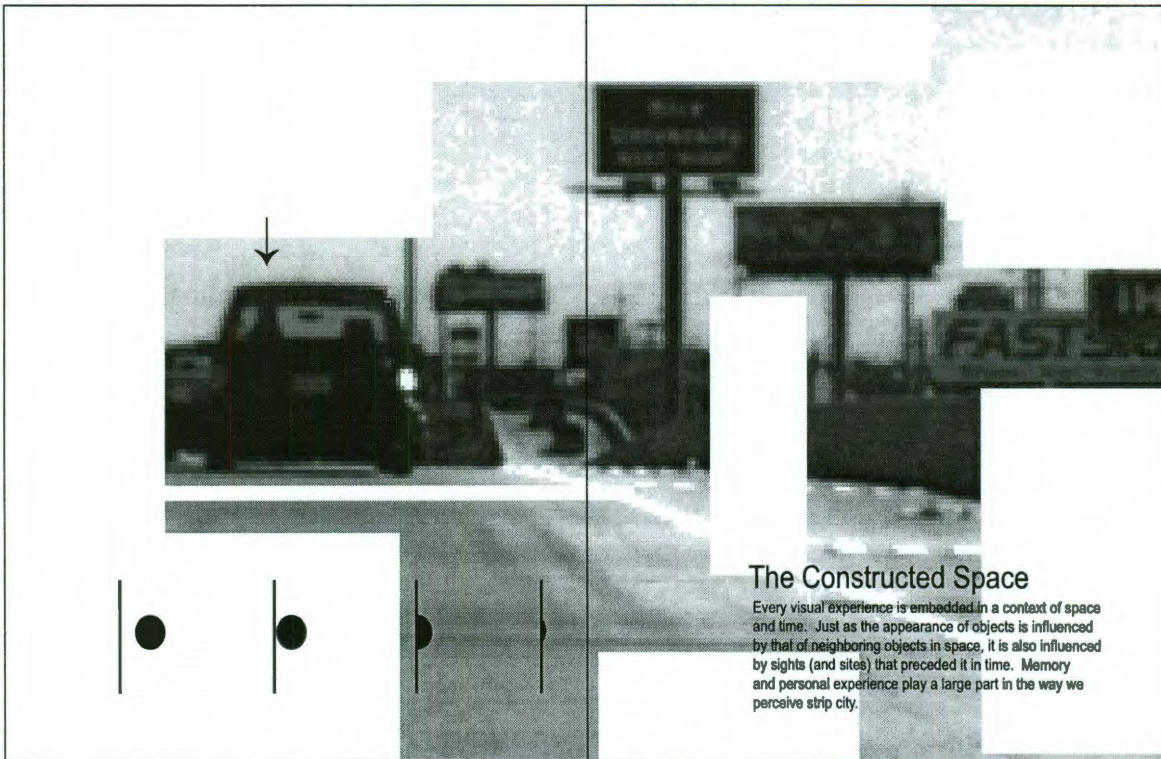
- layering of information
- layering of circulation
- to prearrange circumstances, sometimes in an underhanded fashion











The Constructed Space

Every visual experience is embedded in a context of space and time. Just as the appearance of objects is influenced by that of neighboring objects in space, it is also influenced by sights (and sites) that preceded it in time. Memory and personal experience play a large part in the way we perceive strip city.

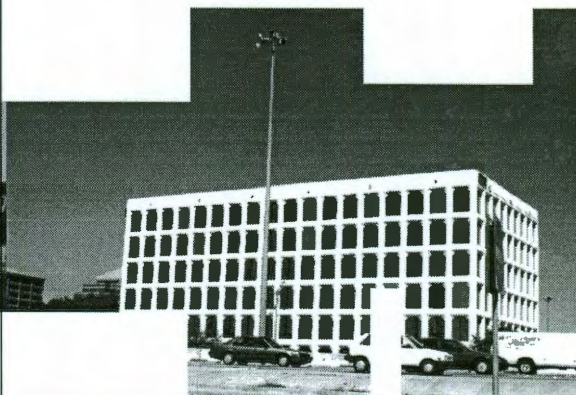
Last Friday, we wanted some more snacks for the game. I realized that, maybe, I could get gas and charge the snacks to my Shell credit card. Just as

I arrived at the station, the Frito truck cut me off and I rammed the curb. I got a flat.

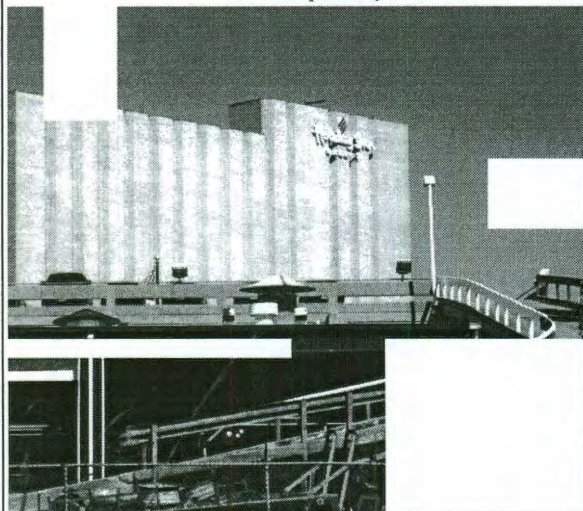
The Frito guy felt so bad that he paid for my fill up and the snacks.



During rush hour, its so hard to get onto the highway. Just as a space opens up, some idiot comes cruising through at 8- miles per hour. Just once, I wish somebody, anybody, would slow down and let me on! We all end up getting about a mile and then entering the grid lock, so what's one more?



It's weird when you're driving and then you stop and look around and see things you never even noticed before. I've probably driven by that Holiday Inn on 59 three hundred times and never noticed it until I was at the Ford dealership on the other side of the highway. Then it was as plain as day.



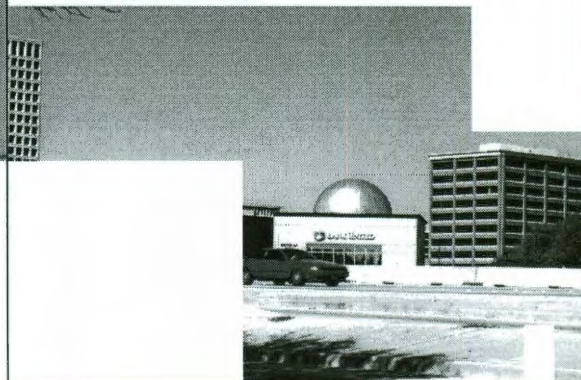
Staying at a cheap motel on the highway is always an experience. Take the time I went to a convention in Houston. I went for a leisurely swim in the outdoor pool, look up and see the highway; people zooming by on their way to work or whatever. I'm just floating there looking at their cars and a tall building.



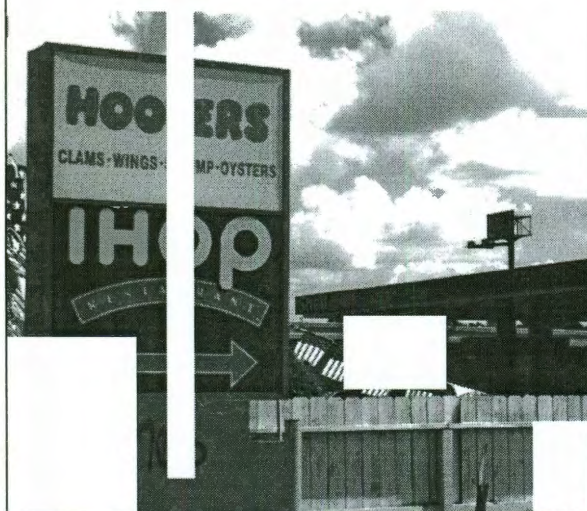
As a kid, we used to play on the old railroad tracks when the circus train would come and park for the few weeks the circus was in town. The colorful train cars and the dirt road there seemed like two completely different worlds. Then they started developing the whole area; cleared all the bungalows away.



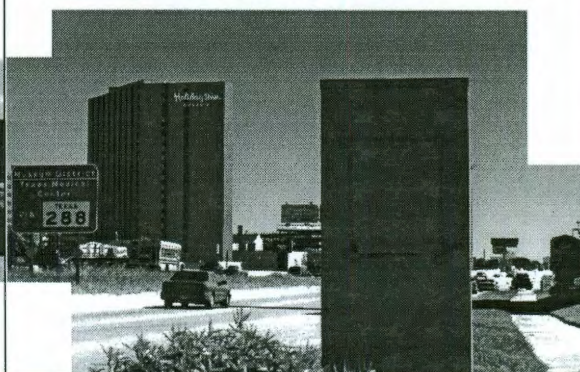
I love it when the Rockets win and the bank covers its golden dome with a big, basketball-colored tarp. On my way to work I look over and see this humungous basketball floating next to the highway. They tore down that building and built a new one-- preserving the same dome and plopping it back on top.



Wondering what "Hooters" was, Stephen and I went to have lunch. The whole way there, we talked about what it might be-- but we still had no idea. Then I said, "yeah, maybe it's a titty bar." Silence. I parked the car and we both hesitated. We chickened out and went to a cafe.

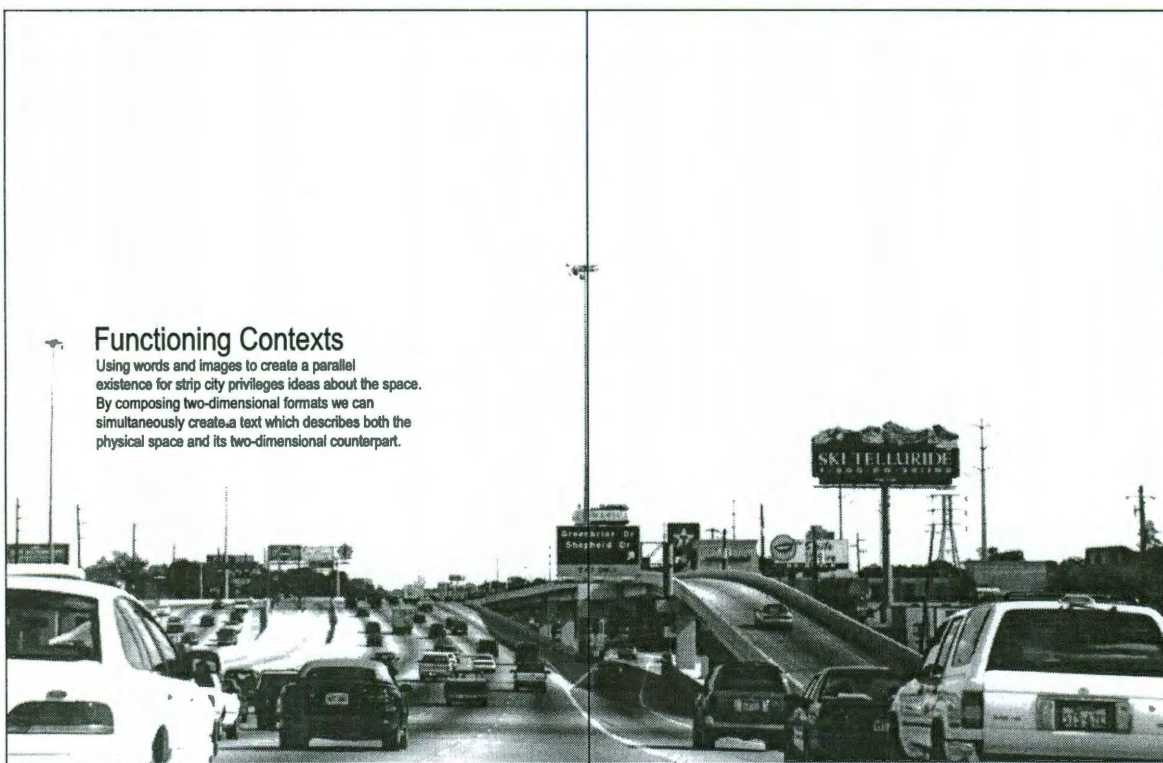


The yard sale had to be somewhere around there. She had told me that it was just off the Kirby exit of 59. I had to make several passes up and down the feeder road, looking for a sign, like those typical of a yard sale. The problem was I couldn't slow down enough to read anything. Needless to say, I ended up at the Galleria.



Functioning Contexts

Using words and images to create a parallel existence for strip city privileges ideas about the space. By composing two-dimensional formats we can simultaneously create a text which describes both the physical space and its two-dimensional counterpart.



contextual mobility

The automobile is the ultimate mobile context. The body's relationship to the car does not change when location of the automobile changes.

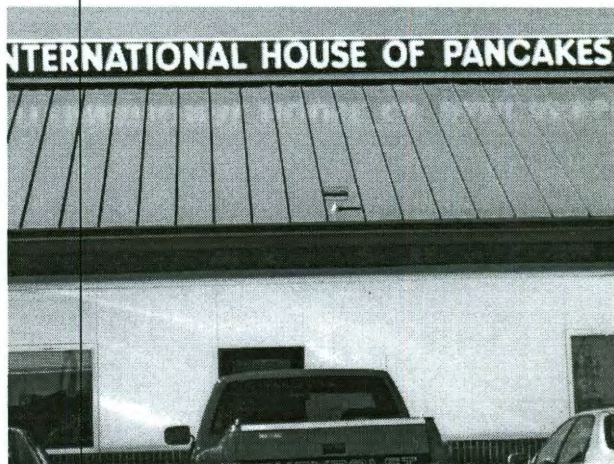


The proliferation of corporate logos, identities and architectural typologies along the highways has lead to a condition called contextual mobility. Setting interactive computer and communication technologies aside, the ability to orient oneself at almost any highway stopping point creates a sense of mastery over the territory being observed.

Graphic information taken in on the road, billboards, street signs, patterns painted on the pavement, are almost identical in any location within strip city. Ritualistic behaviors are formed at familiar locations within strip city. Cars pull up to like positions at gas pumps, customers pay at similar counters and buy national products.

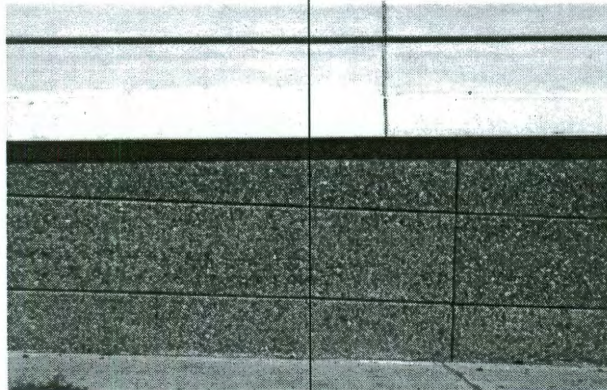
The familiarity of roadside architecture has been both aligned and removed from the signage that coincides with it. Corporate logos and the architecture designed to compliment them become recognizable when viewed over time. Familiar images- the golden arches, or an orange roof or a particular style of architecture, represent specific ideas about program— hamburgers, pancakes, or gasoline.

Once these graphic images are processed and understood by the audience, change within the logo or appearance of the architecture can be difficult. Similarity to the original piece of visual information is key. When franchises develop new identities, change within the appearance of its sign and its building tend to reinvent our perception of the company as a whole.



spontaneous identity

New architecture for a national chain produces a new 'image'. The menu and the name are the only items that remain the same— yet we accept the new visual component without question.



Painstaking care is taken with the design of various highway surfaces. Perfect joints between precast concrete pieces make no real difference in the visual quality of strip cities.

Vision is the tool for navigation through strip city. In turn, strip city provides its inhabitants with a way of seeing. The key to this type of visuality is a hierarchy of visual information displayed to the driver.

Large objects often taking up most of the visual field can go "unseen" while minute details such as street signs appear clearly and without any obstruction or distraction by neighboring signs. What remains is a mode of editorial vision where the information needed is often all that is seen. The effect of this mode of vision on the driver is a sense of perpetual distraction because all information cannot be taken in.

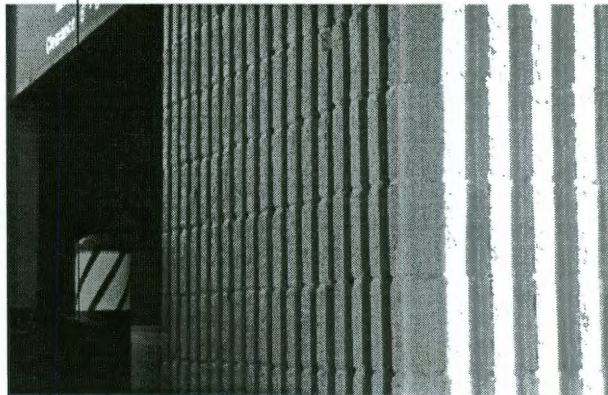
blinding hypersensitivity

Materials used in constructing the architecture of strip city present a type of slick visual tactility. Since these buildings are rarely viewed at close range, functionality is the main factor in choosing materials—especially structure. Many buildings, such as gas stations, use cladding material to convey image rather than solidity or permanence. Although underlying structures more than meet load requirements, cladding often looks nonpermanent, transitory.

Buildings not maintained look dirty or misused. The irony of this is that most of the cladding used in the commercial development of strip city is produced to decay at a particularly slow rate.

The reality of built components is not true to the monumental visual nature that is implied by most architectural typologies in strip city.

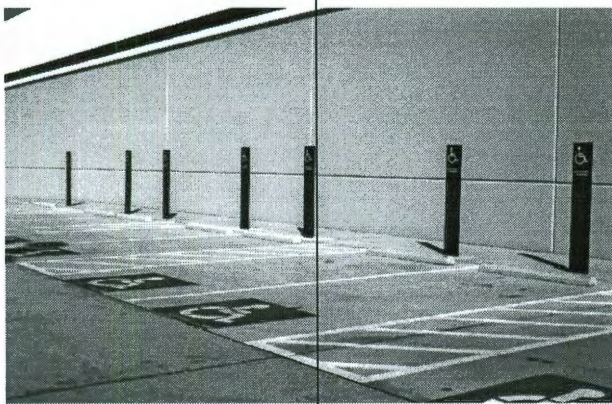
plastic monumentality



repetitive individuality

In the consumer society we live in, the trend of individualism has surface as the number one marketing tool. The spaces of strip city show this in the constant balancing act between genericism and specificity. While purchasing mass-produced items within the commercial developments along the highway, consumers yield a sense of choice.

The abundance of duplicate programs and similar establishments grows until two gas stations may be sited next to one another; superstores pop up every mile and twenty different hamburger joints cling to the highway's edge.



Taking in the views of strip city occurs in the extremely private space of the car. Each apparent viewpoint upon the visual pathway is encountered by thousands of drivers on a daily basis.

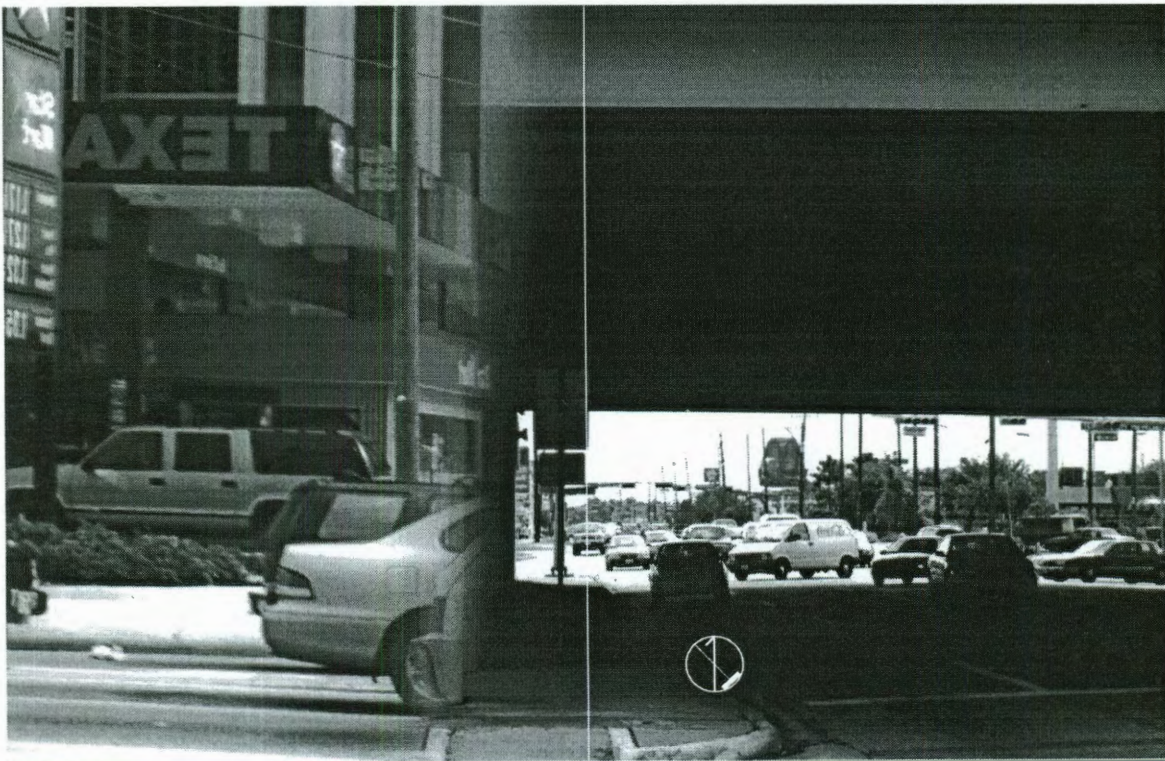


mirror
strip city
vision

The Rearview Mirror

Visually orienting oneself in the spaces of strip city becomes both simplified and complicated by the use of various viewing devices. When what is behind appears in front or to the side of our actual view (mostly often framed by the windshield) unlikely views become juxtaposed. Capturing these juxtapositions creates a third, new context flattened in space and in time.

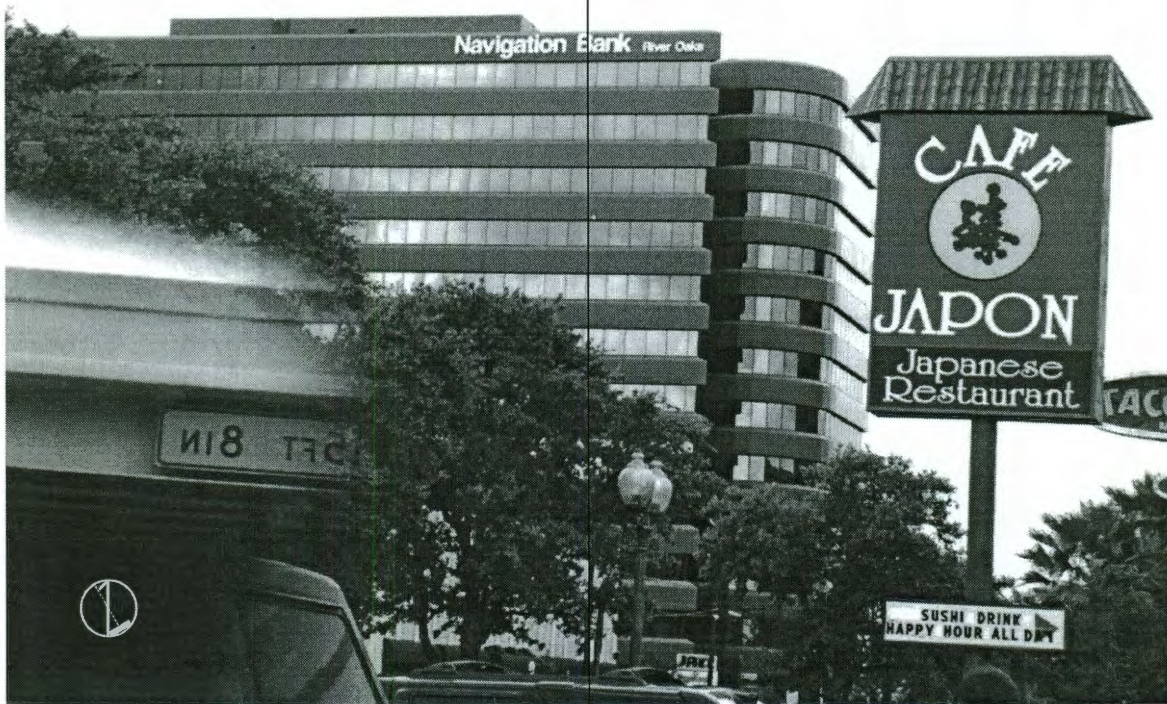


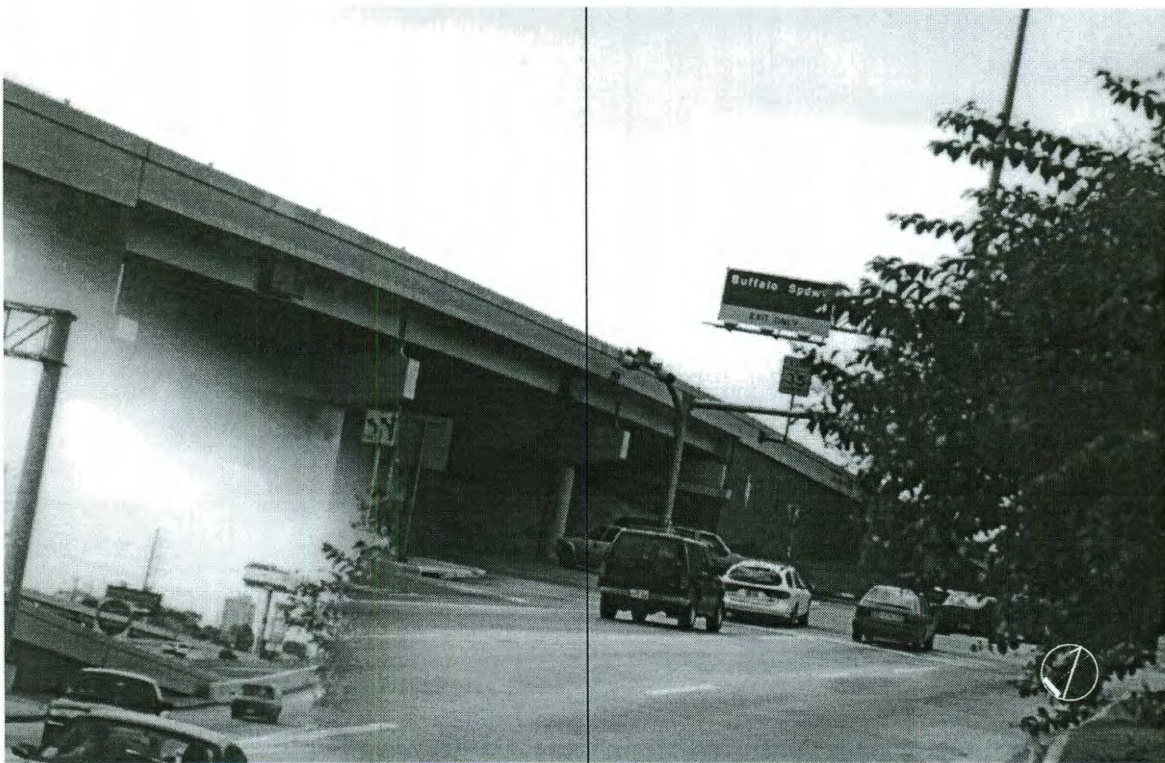




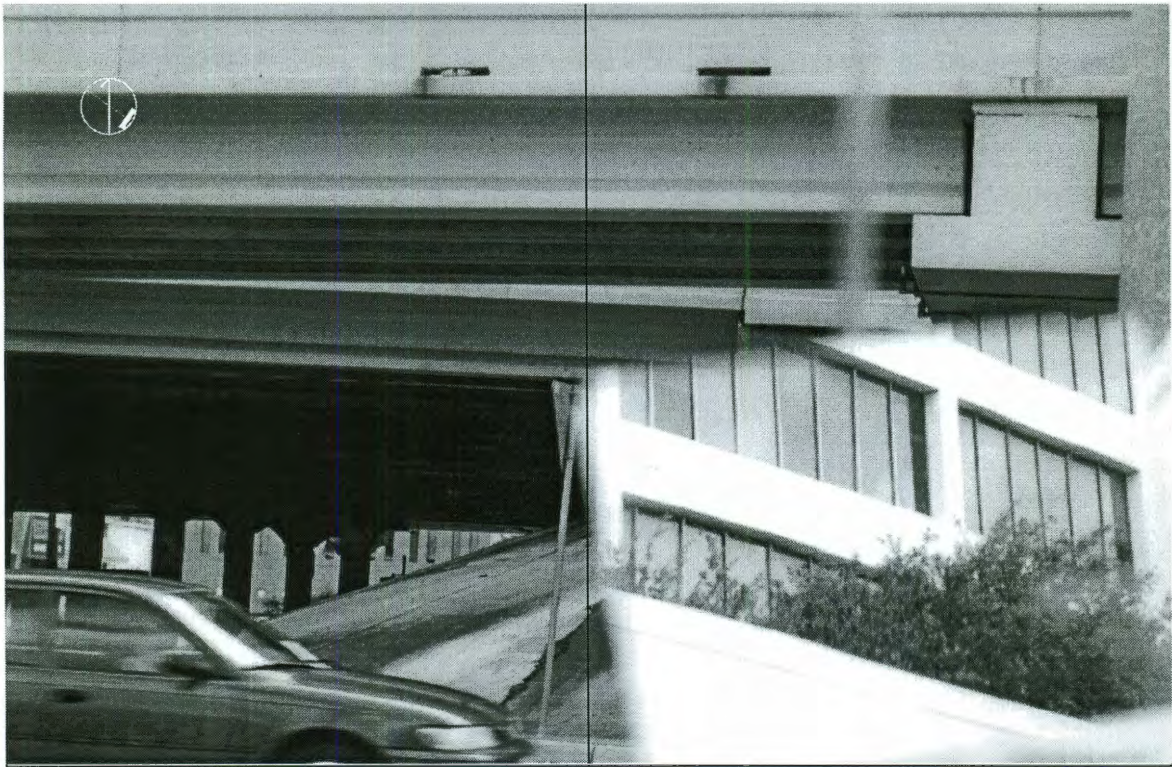




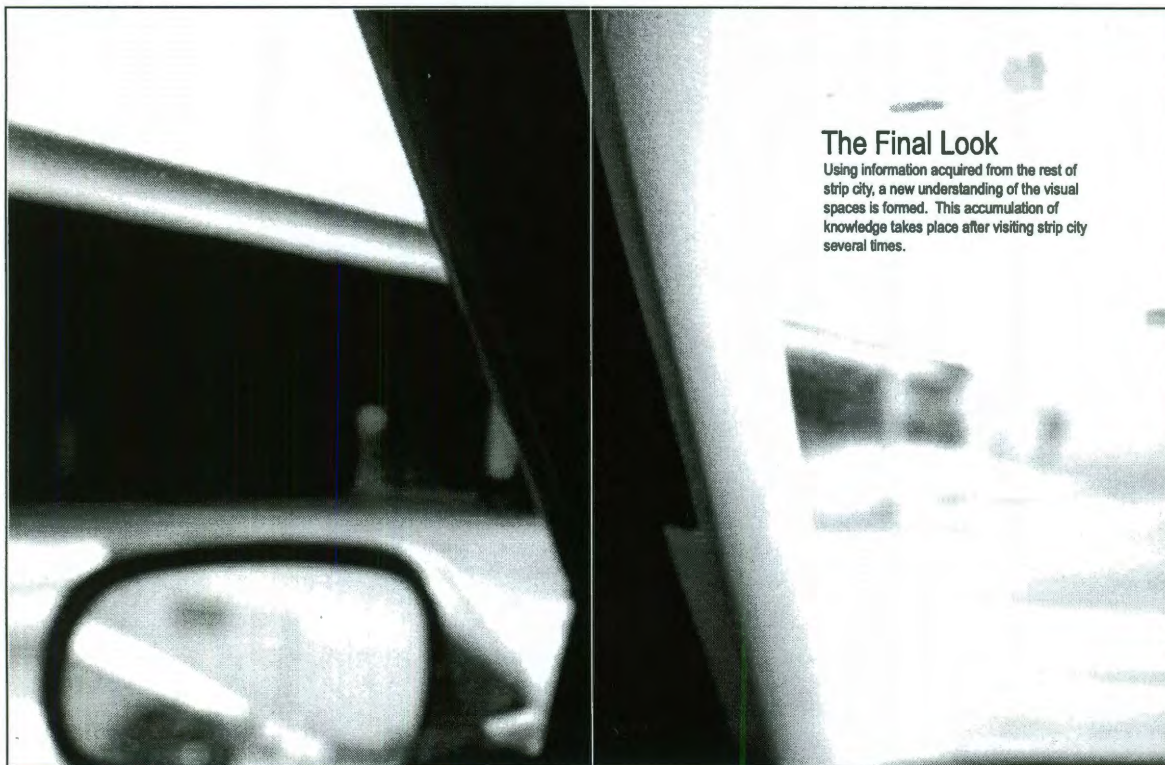










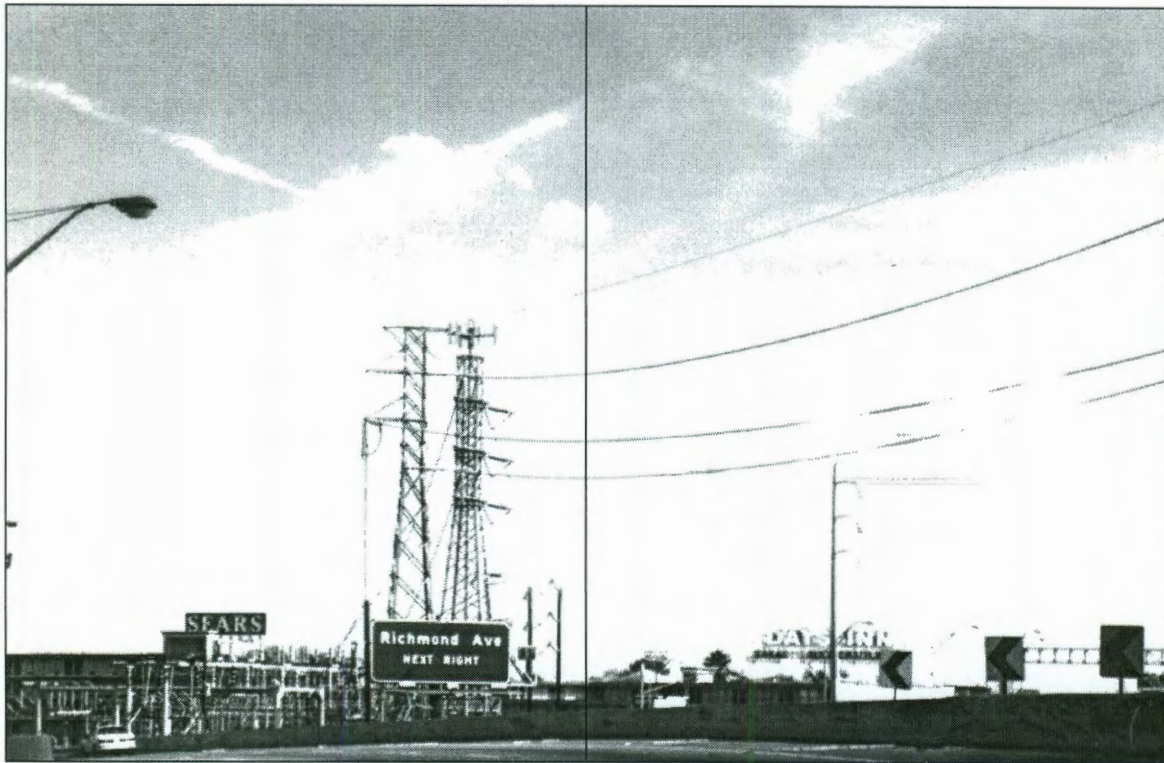


The Final Look

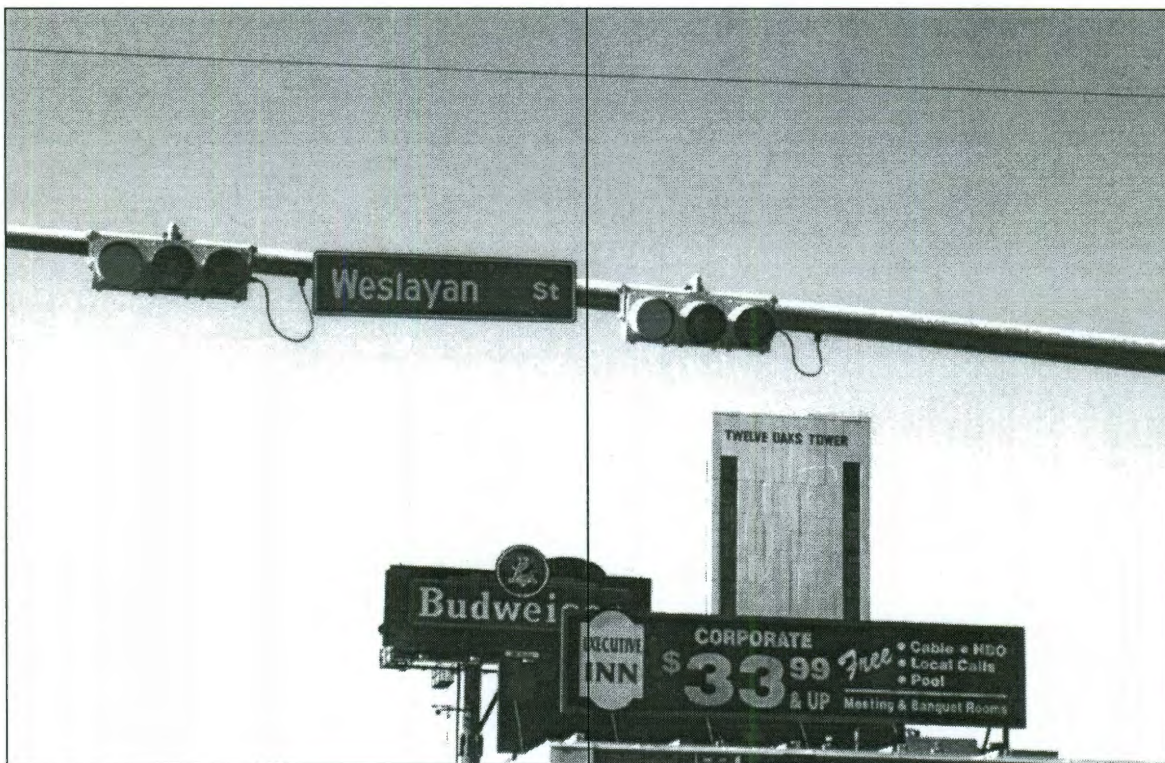
Using information acquired from the rest of strip city, a new understanding of the visual spaces is formed. This accumulation of knowledge takes place after visiting strip city several times.



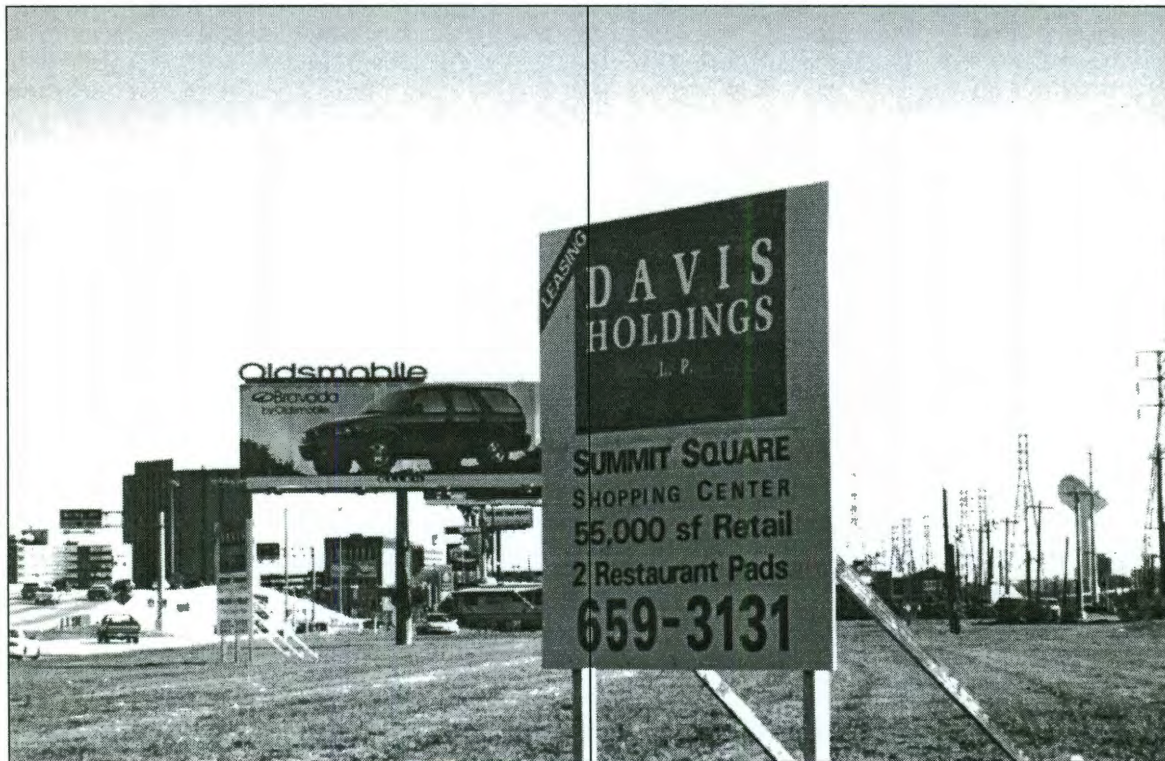
















Naming and Icons

Part of understanding the visual spaces of strip city is related to the naming of objects or phenomena. By providing a verbal or written cue for expressly visual activities taking place in strip city, we can begin to formulate new vocabularies for discussing parts of similar sites or the new urban visuality emerging from them.

















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Colophon

All images in this publication were produced between September and December of 1996 by Sharon A. Steinberg unless otherwise noted. Kodak color film and a Pentax 35mm camera were used to produce all photographs.

Gill Sans, Times, Arial Narrow, Courier, Helvetica, and American Garamond are the primary typefaces.

STRIP CITY was created using a Macintosh Power PC computer, Hewlett Packard bed scanner, and Hewlett Packard LaserJet printer.

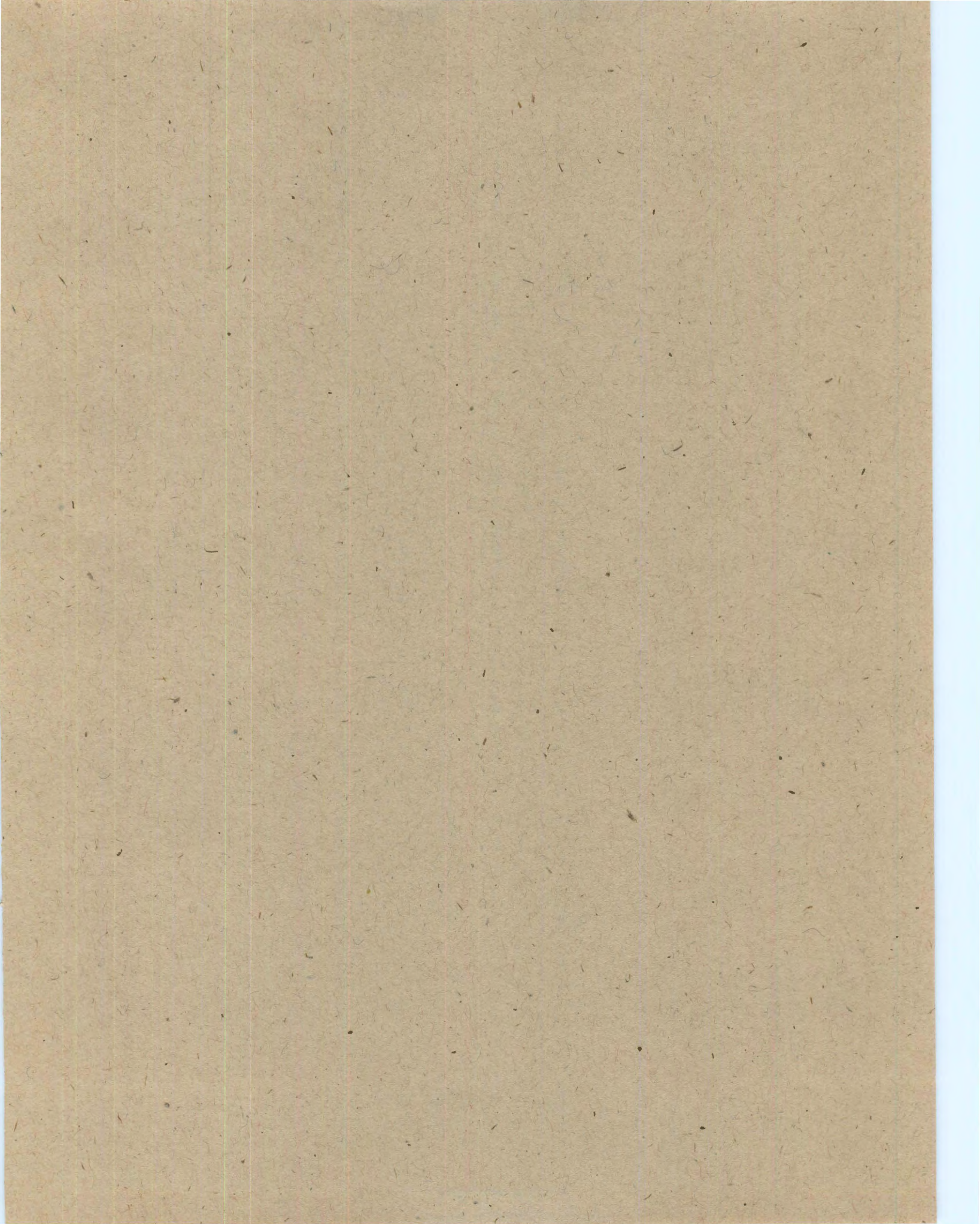
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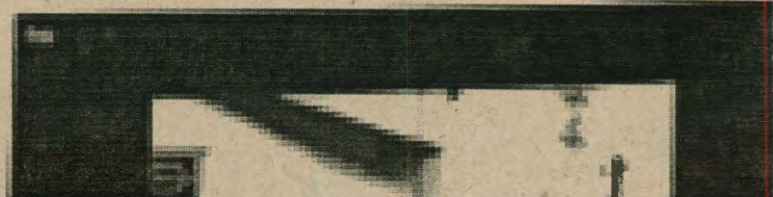
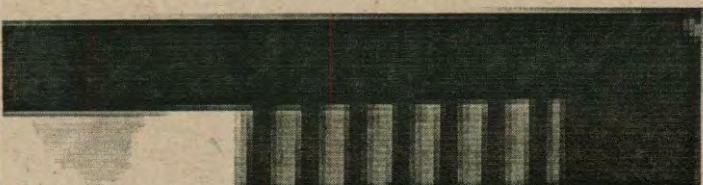
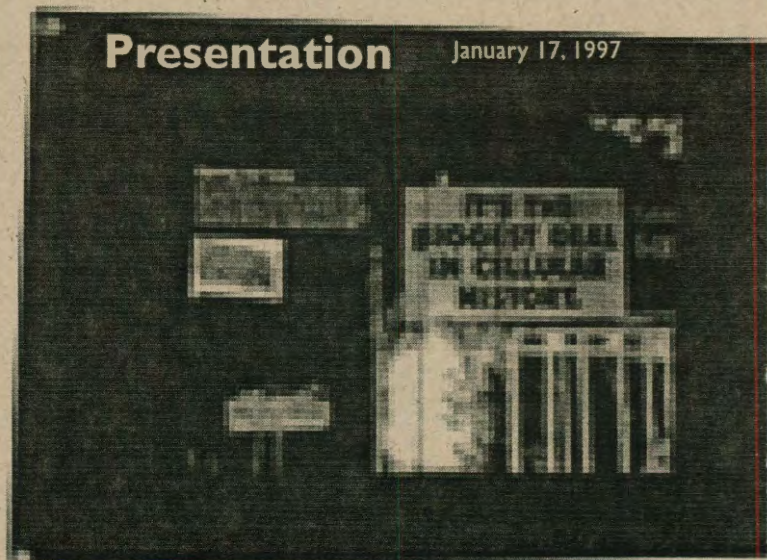
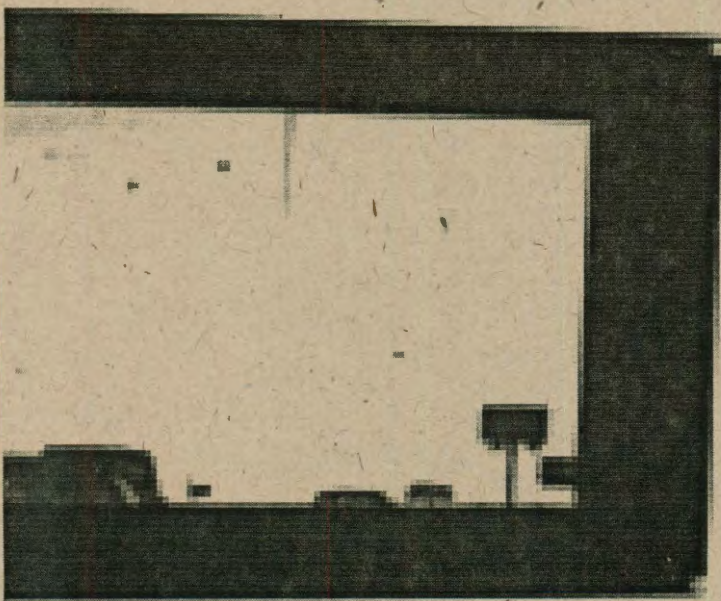
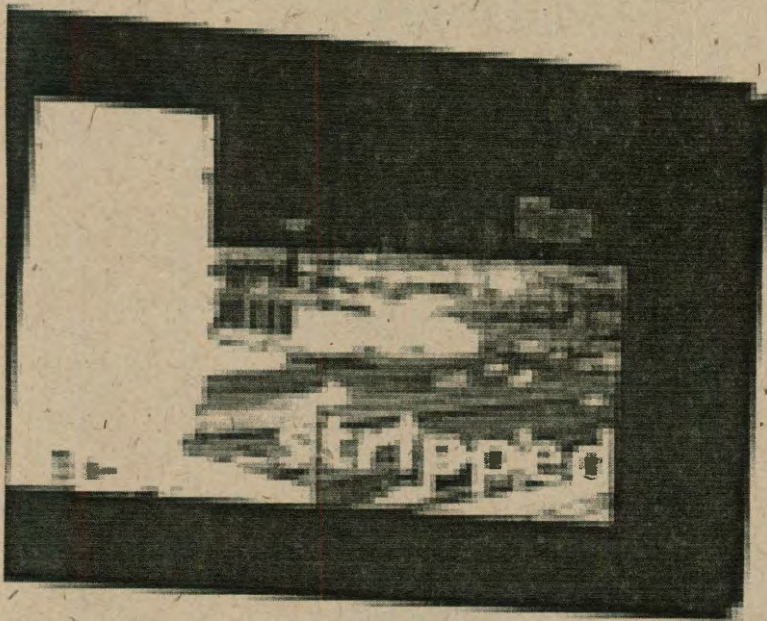
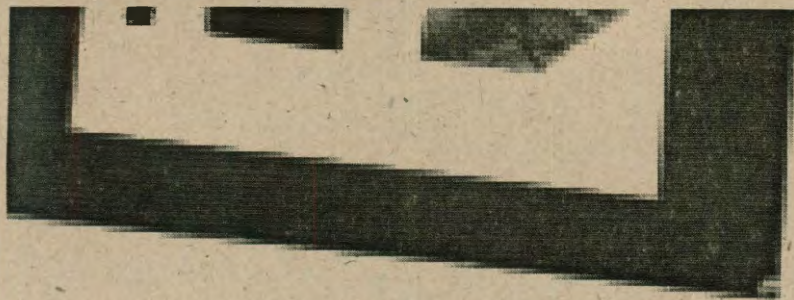
Xerox Docutex technologies produced double-sided copies and Wire-O products were used for binding. Standard 20 lb. white color copy paper used for the interior and 70 lb. astro blue cardstock for the front and back covers. Books trimmed and bound by Kinko's of Houston.

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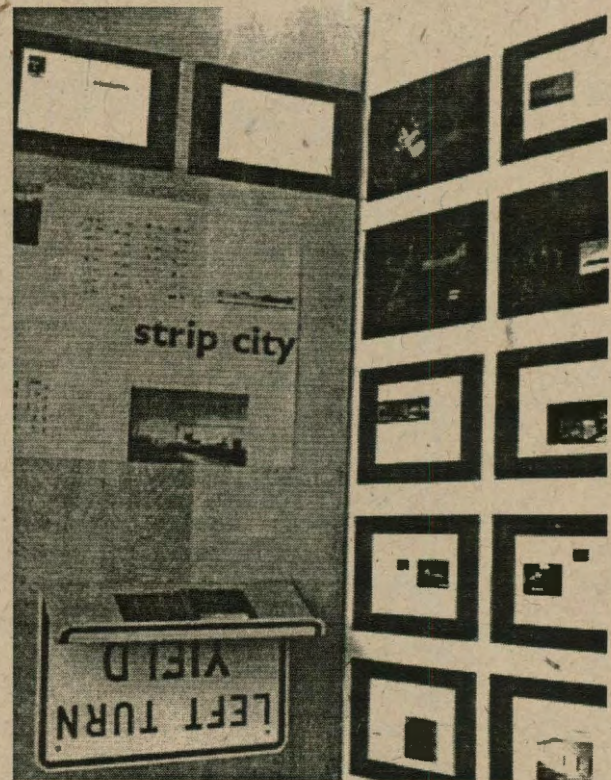
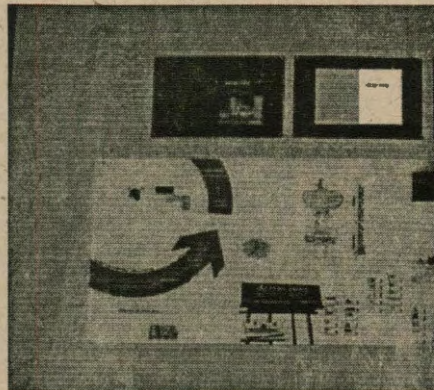


Michael Bell
Albert H. Pope
Lars Lerup
Mary Ann Ray
Robert Mangurian
Merril Elam
Louis DeLaura
Mark Mac

“ Jan Tschichold was an important figure in modern typography because he drew parallels between the cultural “climate” of a particular time period and the design and usage of various typographies. He believed communication through the printed word consistently related back to various contexts within a given time and place. Tschichold took this further, suggesting a type of modernism geared toward graphic design and the printing industry. Here, now versus there, then— or as I have termed *graphic context*.

Mixed into this idea of graphic context is the city of Houston. *Here, now.* The graphic context of Houston is manifested through various modes of visual communication— the most common being signage. The modern concept of the sign, a visual identity put into the stream of a mass audience, captures the essence of architecture through association. The sign becomes a two-dimensional context which directly refers to another set of ideas, products, services.

Through studying signage in Houston, I have returned to the fact that signage and audience always occur together and at a high concentration along the highway. It is the physical structure of the highway, especially elevated portions, which gives Houston a unique visual identity. These highway structures bisect the urban landscape both vertically and horizontally, creating particular type of urban space in the adjacent land. It is this space which flanks the highway paired with the traffic on the highway's deck which forms the focus of this thesis project: STRIP CITY.



STRIP CITY can be defined in numerous ways. It's meaning in the context of this project refers to the traditional "strip" commercial developments so often discussed by architects, developers, business owners, and consumers today.

STRIP CITY implies an urban space which has been "stripped down" to bare essentials, or a space where the previous context has been completely "stripped away", creating a new landscape.

Strip cities mostly occur on highway access roads. The particular strip city I am focusing on is located along Houston's highway 59, approximately a two mile stretch. Studying this specific strip city reveals a more generic theory about the visual development of the highway.

By existing in the three-dimensional urban space, but being primarily comprised of two-dimensional contexts, such as signage or other graphic means, strip city is relegated to the realm of vision. The gaze of those inhabiting strip city tends to flatten into a picture and lose its plasticity. Instead of experiencing being in strip city, we behold it from outside as spectators of images projected onto the surface of the retina.



Boards presented in a rather traditional manner for book layouts—top left to bottom right flow. Process drawing and bound book completed the visuals.

By combining word and image in multiple formats, strip city can be liberated into a completely two-dimensional context where its visual relationships can be understood, and perhaps acted upon. By harnessing the realm of vision as a source for this investigation, I hope to offer a new way of understanding the spaces of strip city we see every day.

Form and content merge into a third graphic environment designed for the easy communication of information through image and typography. The book format being used for this investigation relies, primarily, upon photography to capture, process, and disseminate the visual "information" found in the site. Through designing a graphic context to house this information, an analogous relationship between paging through a book and seeing STRIP CITY is formed.

On the highway, movement in any direction causes a constant reorientation and reframing of views. —One can move through the space of the book and juxtapose any of the contexts; again, reorienting, reframing views.

The density of graphic information in strip city flattens visual space. Buildings in STRIP CITY appear flattened. The images in a book are flattened.

The flow of information varies and offers multiple readings. Related to the frame of the photograph or the windshield, the book retains object quality while mediating this new visual experience of the highway.





As the contents page indicates, strip city is made up of two parts: a theoretical discussion of the nature of vision in STRIP CITY; and a visual pathway through these spaces. These different parts have in common a pedagogic character: this is a "handbook", a tool; and it brings information to architects and to anyone who may take a special interest in what is seen in the spaces of the highway.

The opening pages of the book put forth the visual and physical grounds for the new way of communicating about what we see in today's two-dimensional city. Thereby defining strip city. The ideas and the language that are used promote the visual nature of strip city and its high incidence of graphic information. ” ”

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I would like to thank my very supportive friend Mardie Oakes for helping me get through my last year at Rice, my family for their support and encouragement, and to the entire thesis class of 1997 for a great semester. Thanks goes to Albert Pope, thesis director for his criticism and encouragement throughout my years at Rice.

Colophon

This thesis document was produced using Adobe Pagemaker, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator all on a Macintosh system. Output was achieved through Hewlett-Packard Laserjet and Xerox technologies. Papers are all acid-free, archival quality.

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